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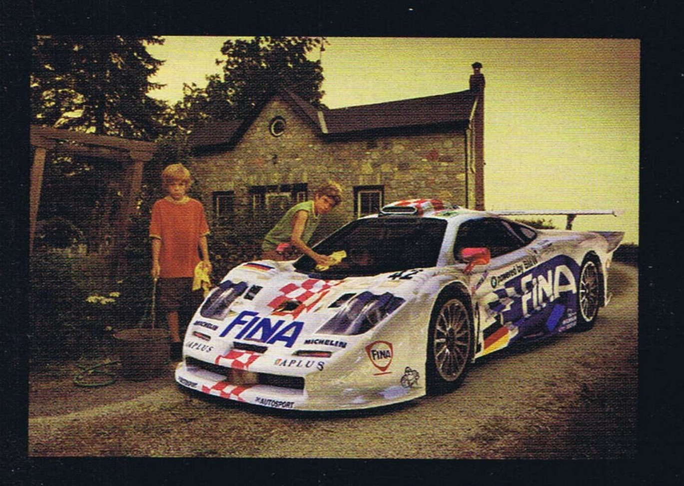


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The iPod Killer

Playing with Sony's PSP - The sexiest piece of gaming hardware ever made

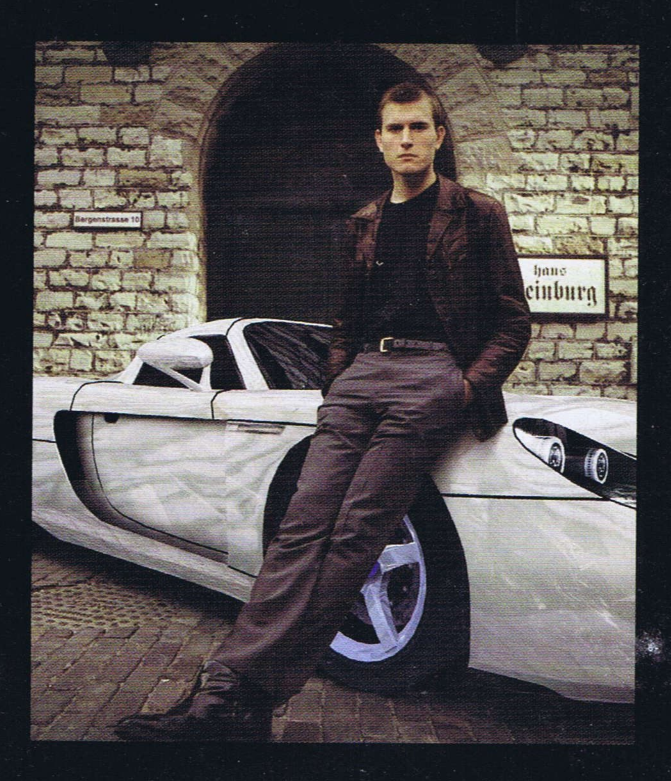
PREVIEWED BATTLEFIELD 2 **SWAT 4** STAR WARS: REPUBLIC COMMANDO **GTR** ENTHUSIA **DRAG-ON DRAGOON 2**
REVIEWED RIDGE RACERS **MARIO 64 DS** ODDWORLD: STRANGER'S WRATH **RESIDENT EVIL 4** MGS:3 SNAKE EATER **KOTOR II**





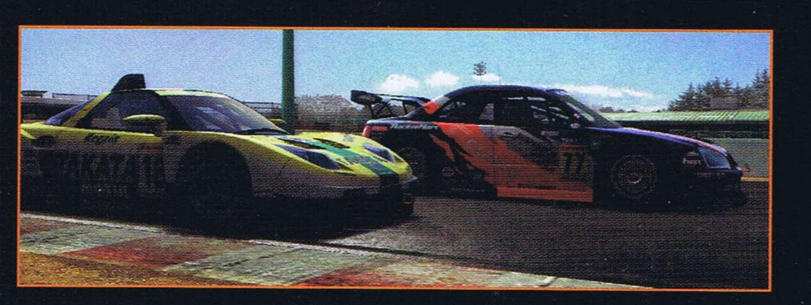
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the competition what the back of your car looks like.





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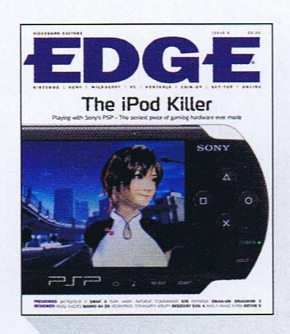


Ferrari
Official Licensed Product



it's good to play together

XBOX LIVE



Why would we call PSP the 'iPod Killer'? There's a couple good reasons to think that we got this one wrong, but ultimately **Edge** feels it's a title that will fit the bill, if not now, in a year or so to come.

The primary reason would be that it's actually the Nintendo DS that's recently enjoyed a sales boom that overshadows all of Apple's achievements with the slimline MP3 player. It may have been years since Nintendo was seen as the champion of the console wars, but it has owned the handheld gaming market for so long, there was always going to be a massive fan base waiting to go with the DS.

The second natural reason not to call PSP the iPod killer would be that it's a handheld gaming system, and iPod is a rather limited portable media device. How can you compare the two? Although companies like Creative Labs have made sure that Apple will be looking to create new iPod models that branch out into audio-visual entertainment, PSP is considerably more cumbersome and complex.

Still confused then? Well, the reason we dub it a killer is because iPod is now where Sony want the PSP to be. Even though the iPod is just another portable media device, ask your average punter what an MP3 player is called and they'll say it's an 'iPod'. That average punter wants one, even though there are much cheaper and more feature-rich options available.

The cash registers may show that the DS has already won the GameBoy faithful over, but for anyone who has seen a PSP's screen in action, it's obvious that Sony have cottoned on to the same undeniable truth that Apple did with their 'I' range. Smooth surfaces and clean curves may not improve performance, but they suddenly make 'sexy' seem like an apt description for a portable piece of electronic entertaiment.

Still feeling a bit socially backward with that one? Well, here's one last analogy for you then. When you come across someone whose aesthetics are so striking that you can't take your eyes from them, or find so pleasing to touch that you couldn't let go of them, would you be prepared to describe that as out and out sex appeal?

If so, start working on justifying your indecent obsession with Sony's shameless beauty. 



EDGE

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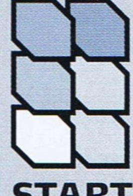
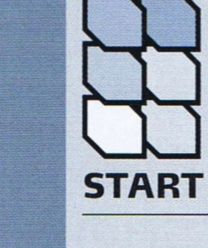
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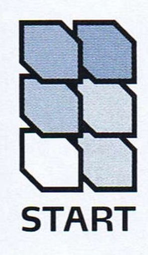












START

HARDWARE

PSP takes Japan

Nintendo makes way for Sony's own sellout



Playing to the Japanese consumer's insatiable appetite for new electronic goods is a sales strategy most local software and hardware companies have developed to laser-honed precision. Even if the Japanese technology scene had quietened somewhat since the heyday of Microsoft generating mass hysteria over a midnight Akihabaran launch for Windows 95, there was little question that Sony would engineer a spectacle for the PSP's first day of sales.

The launch of the PSP and the PS2 could not have been more similar: both machines were widely promoted for a particular hardware feature, rather than software (DVD playback for the PS2, the beauty of the widescreen and the multimedia features for the PSP). Both heavy marketing campaigns were accompanied by a limited, but convoluted, pre-order process, with Sony's online store encountering the same difficulties that it had four years ago with the PS2 launch, and many other online Japanese retailers selling out within hours of opening preorders – driving up the impetus to mob storefronts on launch day. Those who took the plunge and queued, some overnight, had a better chance of at least catching sight of a PSP, with some online customers failing to receive their machines due to chaotic stock allocation.

As usual, West Shinjuku was the place to be for new hardware, with the biggest PSP shipment scheduled for Yodobashi Camera's game store (Yodobashi being one of Japan's major discount dealers). By 5am, 900 hopeful customers were ringing the block around Yodobashi, and at 5:30 Ken Kutaragi and attendant Sony development staff arrived to celebrate the launch with an official countdown. By 6am, a civilised enough hour for the media to begin reporting on the event in earnest, some 1,500 people were assembled to collect their pre-orders, with the first few served by Kutaragi himself: in three hours, the store had sold out of its 1,500 unit allocation. The nearby Bic Camera's 1,000 units were sold out by 10am, with most other Tokyo locations ransacked in time for brunch.

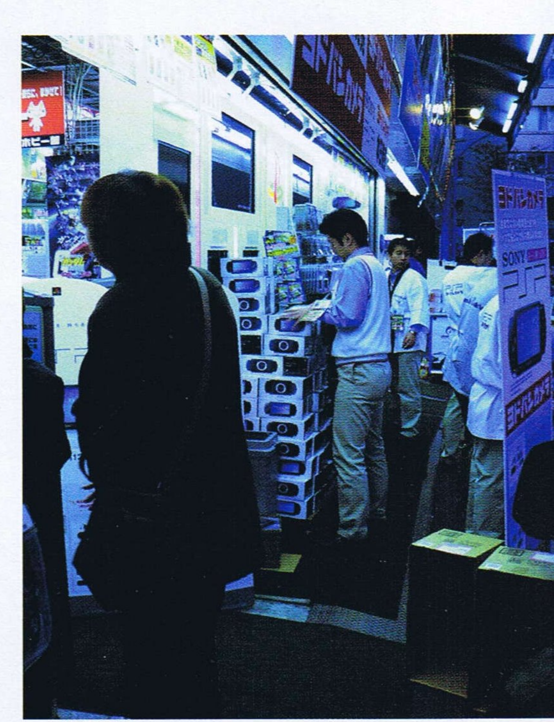
By 5am, 900 hopeful customers were ringing the block, and at 5:30 Ken Kutaragi and attendant Sony development staff arrived

Supplementing the Japanese gamers in the crowds was a large contingent of Chinese buyers, intending to purchase the machines in bulk to sell on overseas. In a considerably better organised rollout than that of the PSP itself, scouts were travelling from one store to the next to keep buyers appraised of the dwindling PSP stocks, while runners collected units to return them to waiting rented trucks. Shinjuku station was abuzz with Chinese runners, some bearing as many as ten PSPs at a time, and both these and the trucks laden with hundreds of units drew resentful glares – but nothing stronger – from the steady influx of Japanese PSP hunters.





Several of the faithful (top) whiled away the hours with Pictochat, giving some indication that the handhelds could coexist in a far less volatile state than internet forums suggest



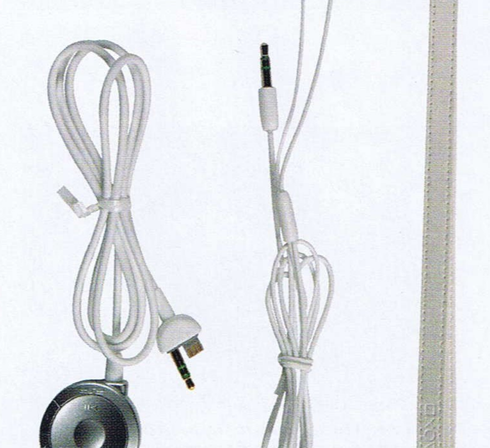
SCE head Ken Kutaragi had already finished his stint on the counter by the time our length of the queue wound inside, leaving more experienced Yodobashi staff to frantically fill orders

Tensions rose in the queues as it became apparent the Chinese brokers had devised a new strategy to maximise their profits: employing Shinjuku's homeless community to buy PSPs for them. The homeless were given money to purchase a PSP and instructions to return them to designated locations in return for a reward – predictably, some saw a more lucrative opportunity in simply escaping with the money. This resulted in some aggressive searching of the queues and streets for the absconders by furious buyers, much to the alarm of watching Sony officials.

After the tumultuous morning – evidence of which could be found in streetside cafes throughout Tokyo as bleary eyed early adopters set about exhausting the half-charged batteries on their new machines – Sony made a surprise second launch of the machine at around 1:30pm, restocking distributors with approximately the same number of units as their initial quotas. No one could be more surprised by this event than those unfortunate shoppers who had returned home empty-handed, after travelling for up to two hours by train to reach Tokyo, only to discover that the PSP was back on sale.

Shinjuku's early morning PSP deliveries arrive. Such was the speed and efficiency of Chinese export buyers that many of these PSPs were returned to the backs of waiting trucks in record time

Post-launch figures indicated that 171,963 PSPs were sold on the 12th, some 85 per cent of the 200,000 run. Unsurprisingly, the Value Pack accounted for the majority of these sales



The Value Pack add-ins look spectacular from an airbrushed distance, but the headphones are cheap (in both feel and sound quality), the remote only passable and the high-tensile wrist strap largely inexplicable



PSP stock (temporarily) eclipsed the promotional DS posters: the relative smoothness of Nintendo's preorder and rollout for its machine created less frantic queues – and less media attention

Post-launch figures indicated that 171,963 PSPs were sold on the 12th, some 85 per cent of the 200,000-unit first production run. Unsurprisingly, the Value Pack accounted for the majority of these sales.

Software sales saw mixed numbers, with *Minna No Golf* and *Ridge Racers* (see page 56) taking the top spots at 72,859 and 65,636 sales respectively. Capcom's 2D fighter *Vampire Chronicle* (see page 77) was one of the lower-charting titles, selling 14,442 copies, while the smallest sales numbers went to Bandai's *Lumines* (see page 68) with 7,711 – however, that number accounts for nearly half of its manufacture run, a better overall performance than some of the PSP's big-name titles.

Despite difficulties with supply over the following weeks, prompting Sony to make a public apology for shortages on their homepage, PSP sales appeared to follow predictions. In the first month on sale, a little over 100,000 units sold each week, with total sales at 482,252 units by January 2. The handheld war is in full swing now.

HARDWARE

NDS storms ahead in Japan and US

Combined first-week sales for both territories take handheld past the million mark as new portable gaming era arrives

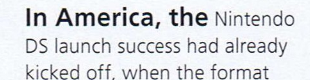
It'd been a while since Japanese gamers have queuing around the block to get their hands on new gaming hardware – but then it'd been a while since Japanese gamers have been faced with something as thoroughly likeable as Nintendo's DS, which beat the PSP to Japanese shelves when it went on sale in the region on December 2. So it was that some of Tokyo's most popular gaming stores, such as Yodobashi Gamekan in west Shinjuku, attracted punters willing to sleep out in the winter cold from 11pm the previous evening in order to be among the first to get their hands on new consoles come opening time at 7am. By December 5, a massive 468,883 DS units had been purchased by Japanese consumers, making the format a resounding success for Nintendo, if an unexpected one (the company's value immediately rise on the Tokyo stock exchange). By new year, over 1,000,000 units sold.

Among the first wave of DS buyers was an encouragingly high number of female gamers, along with many parents and grandparents looking to pick up machines as New Year gifts for children. Less happy were the scenes involving Chinese entrepreneurs seeking to buy units in bulk before returning to Hong Kong, which saw several run-ins with store management take place. It had happened before, and will happen again. (It also meant that the import scene outside of Japan wasn't as busy as it might otherwise have been.)

Unsurprisingly, *Super Mario 64 DS* (see p58) was, along with *Sawaru Made In Wario*, the most popular game at launch, followed by the likes of *Pokémon Dash, Daigasso! Band Brothers, Kiminotamenara Shineru* and *Chokkan Hitofude*.

Nintendo achieved American DS sales of over one million before the year's end, a figure it took Apple's iPod 19 months to achieve

With DS units shipping with a supply of battery power on board, the streets were soon full of eager users trying out Pictochat. The simplistic comms facility was an instant hit, just as it has been with anyone who's had the opportunity to sample it in a social setting.



In America, the Nintendo DS launch success had already kicked off, when the format debuted on November 21. By the end of the launch week, over 500,000 machines had been purchased, and Nintendo achieved North American DS sales of over one million before the year's end, a figure the company took delight in noting it took Apple 19 months to achieve with its 'all conquering' iPod. (Scarily, over 800,000 GBA and GBA SP units also sold during the same Thanksgiving period in the US, setting a new one-week sales record for handhelds).

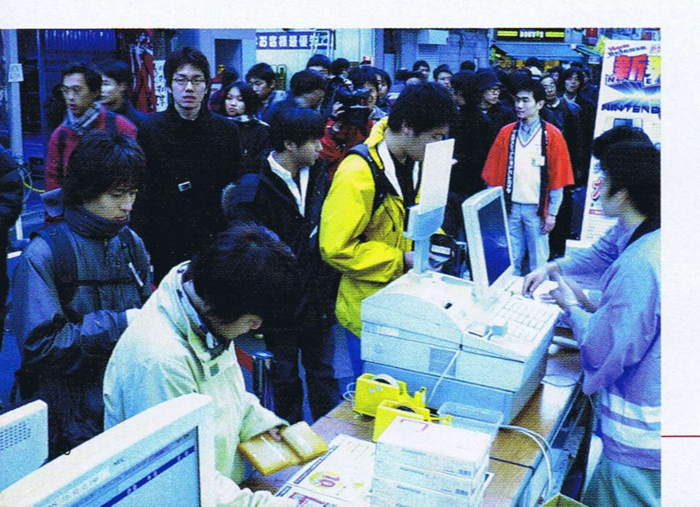
Across the globe, Nintendo expects to sell between four and five million DS units by the end of its fiscal year – a number that totally eclipses Sony's projections, despite selling 100,000 units a week in Japan since the PSP launch.

The new handheld era has begun – and unless you've bought this issue the day it hit the shelves, you can be a part of it today with the DS.

Key titles, such as *Super Mario 64 DS* and *Sawaru Made In Wario*, sold around 150,000 copies each within four days of going on sale in Japan – some achievement for the nation's depressed gaming climate – though Namco's *Mr Driller* shifted only 11,000









The streets of Shinjuku had a buzz that hasn't been around for a long while as key stores prepared to move Nintendo's new hardware. Many had arrived to buy before heading off to work



PROMO

Pen yourself a free Nintendo DS pack

Edge readers who can best sum up the merits of the NDS can win their very own

Even though many **Edge** readers will already be a statistic. having splashed out on the revolutionary Nintendo DS, not everyone can afford to take up a new gaming system, despite its merits.

Nintendo Australia and **Edge** Australia are giving you the chance to prove you've been dwelling on the NDS's future by giving a **Nintendo DS, Super Mario 64 DS**, and **Made in Wario** to the five readers who submit the best ideas for use of the Nintendo DS's stylus or microphone in 100 words or less - as judged by the Edge editorial team.

Winners will be announced in the next issue of Edge. Entries close on 12/4/05. Send them to:
EDGE NDS COMP, P.O Box 1037, Bondi Junction, NSW 1355.

TITLE ☐MR ☐MRS ☐MS ☐MISS

Name______________________________

Address______________________________

____

State_______________ Postcode__________

Telephone (inc. area code)____________________

NDS idea (100 words or less)____________________

SOUND BYTES

"By entering our prize contest, you can help to establish the facts of what happened on November 22nd, 1963 – and win up to $100,000 in the process!"
JFK Reloaded – the game which recreates the assassination of President Kennedy – announces a competition for conspiracy theorists everywhere (read more on p21).

"Natural challenges with finalizing all the key features and localization issues across worldwide territories have led to the difficult choice of pushing back the release date in order to ensure that *Gran Turismo 4* lives up to the exacting standards of the 36 million-plus fans worldwide that have purchased previous versions."
An SCEA statement reveals the reason – or at least a reason – for *GT4*'s latest delay

"They look great! They are small enough to travel with and will help me pass away many hours when I'm on tour, especially on those long bus rides."
Pop 'star' Pink at the DS's US launch

HARDWARE

Gizmondo limps to launch

UK-designed handheld sneaks out in its homeland boasting a new graphics chip, but suffering stock shortages and no gaming software

Tiger Telematics' press statements have called it 'the softest of soft launches', but compared to the razzmatazz of the Sony and Nintendo roadshows, Gizmondo's debut bordered on the flaccid. After signing a last-minute deal with Nvidia to equip the device with a more powerful GoForce 3D graphics part, manufacture and testing of the console had to begin afresh. As a result, the company was unable to supply any units to retail at launch, instead distributing the small number of units it had ready to some of the 560,000 customers it claims have made internet pre-orders. Another casualty of the GoForce switch has been the machine's gaming launch line-up, with the first three titles, *SuperDrop Mania*, *StuntCar Extreme* and *Angel Fish*, delayed until after Christmas. Other titles are being reworked and optimised to take advantage of the machine's newly increased power.

It's an embarrassing start for the Gizmondo, whose aggressive television and internet advertising had been timed for the launch, but the machine's range of capabilities mean it is not nonsensical as a standalone purchase. Running Windows Media Player 9, and allowing music and video files to be copied direct to the device's SD-card storage via USB 2.0, it is a more immediately credible multimedia device than any other gaming hybrid yet announced. Current owners will also be able to distract themselves with the machine's GPS functions while they wait for the games to arrive. Out of the box, the device is capable of sending an update to any mobile phone number, allowing the recipient to see a map displaying the Gizmondo's (and the Gizmondo owner's) current location.



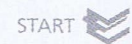
Angel Fish **plays like a very traditional 2D shooter, but the hand-drawn style of its backdrops gives it a distinctive character, and it boasts a highly satisfying quad-laser smartbomb attack**

After such a disastrous launch, there is a temptation to write off the Gizmondo, but as its developer reveals more of its future plans, there are more and more indications that to do so might be unwise. The intention now is to have stock ready for a full retail rollout, supported by optimised game software, by early February next year.

It's not yet clear how big an impact the GoForce chip will have on the kind of games Gizmondo can run; the 'Xbox in your pocket' is a compelling marketing line, but so far the company has nothing to show which backs up its claim. However,



From protoype (courtesy of ZX Spectrum designer Rick Dickinson) to finished article. It's been a bumpy ride for Gizmondo, which has changed name, graphics chip and button design along the way. Early astrological sign-style symbols were revised when journalists pointed out that no one would know what to call them






While *SuperDrop Mania* won't benefit much from the new Nvidia graphics chip, *StuntCar Extreme* already looks much improved, with more details on buildings and ramped-up lighting effects









there's no question that the machine would have otherwise been badly underpowered going into 2005, so, despite the launch headaches, the new graphics chip has undoubtedly strengthened its position.

Also unconfirmed at this stage is just how heavyweight the future line-up might be. It's known that the company is in talks with major publishers, and if Gizmondo can gain access to big brand franchises, its gaming credibility will be greatly enhanced for the wider market. Brands alone aren't enough – as the N-Gage's early months

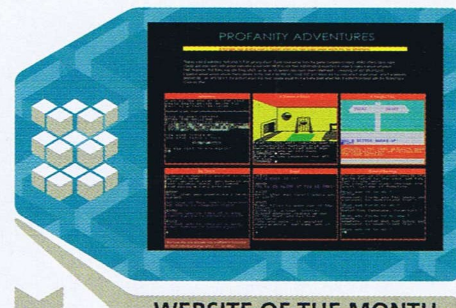
The 'Xbox in your pocket' is a compelling marketing line, but so far the company has nothing to show to back up the claim

showed – but Tiger Telematics is confident that it has the skills to tailor home console hits to maximise their appeal on a handheld. Its recent acquisition of Warthog has given it access to Tusk, a game-porting engine it believes will streamline the process of adapting games. The engine will already be being pressed into service following deals with SCi and Microsoft to launch games such as *Age Of Empires* and the *Conflict* series on the Gizmondo. The game pricing policy, which stretches from £10 ($24) for the simpler launch titles to £30 ($48) for prestige games, also indicates a greater sophistication in its understanding of the market than some of its current rivals have shown.

Its multimedia ambitions are equally far-reaching. To support the device's use as a music player, Tiger Telematics will be launching a commercial music download website, using the OD2 service which backs Coca Cola, HMV and MSN's music download portals. The company is also confident it will have full GPS software ready for the 'hard' launch this month, making the unit's £230 ($560) pricetag seem suddenly much more competitive when compared to $1,000 in-car units. A car cradle and other accessories will be available to back this kind of usage. GPS also lets the Gizmondo act as a security device: set up a 'geo-fence' – a virtual perimeter – around the Gizmondo, leave it in the boot when you park, and if the Gizmondo (and therefore your car) leaves the perimeter, you'll receive an instant alert to your mobile phone. Later in the year full email support will follow.

Gizmondo could hardly have more to prove. Recent bullish announcements that Tiger Telematics expects the unit's price point to go as low as £50 ($122) within a year sound almost suicidal, but make more sense in context of the device's ability to subsidise itself through targeted advertising to which users can choose to sign up. However, despite trialling the Smart Adds system with 52 advertisers earlier this year, the company isn't able to confirm take-up of the new system. It's the perfect illustration of Gizmondo's current situation – an ambitious promise backed up by nothing more concrete than another ambitious promise.

However, if Gizmondo's exuberant confidence is justified, and if all of these features become a reality outside of the system's homeland (Edge will follow up with Renaissance Ltd. on this), then the new handheld war might yet – almost unbelievably – become a three-way battle.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

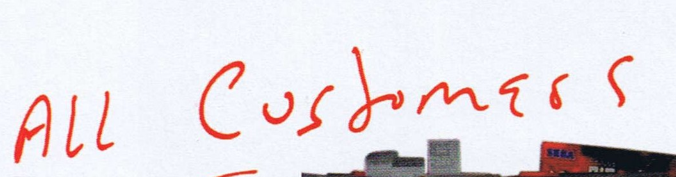
As anyone who's enjoyed constructing an intelligent argument will know, swearing isn't big or clever, but it is – in context – jolly funny. Monkeon's collections of text adventure screenshots capture the reactions to profane user input, five pages of typed-in filth and indignant automatic responses. The best is probably *Very Big Adventure* which, upon receipt of a 'shit', places the user in a swearbox with a washstand and soap. 'You know what to do,' it says. Yes. Yes, we do.

Site: Swearing in text adventures
URL: http://www.monkeon.co.uk/swearadventure/





A rare sighting of a retail-ready Gizmondo. The jury is still out on how wise a choice the name is, but there's no doubt that the restrained packaging design gives the console some class







EVENT

Turok: bargain hunter

Acclaim's bankruptcy sale reveals opportunities for snooping, a selection of unreleased games… and some cheap furniture

Over the years, we have had the opportunity to go 'inside' any number of world-famous developers, but never like this. Last September Acclaim filed for Chapter Seven bankruptcy, and as a result the courts were required to auction off any remaining assets to meet some of the company's $100 million debts. The sale was held in the company's vast Long Island offices, and anyone willing to pay the $500 deposit – be they investors, collectors, homeowners or perhaps something else entirely – was granted access to come in and pick Acclaim's bones clean.

And so a strange mix of people gathered at what was, whether they realised it or not, the wake of a fallen monster. Some swapped stories outside, reminiscing over cigarettes about times spent with Acclaim. "I still remember when I got that *Turok* game for Christmas," one attendee said, before taking a slow, contemplative drag. He didn't speak much after that. Some attendees claimed to have never played a videogame in their lives. Most came to buy some cheap goods to resell for a quick buck. Others were dragged along by significant others, a few seemed genuinely lost. One lady 'just wanted a couch'.

Some attendees claimed to have never played a videogame in their lives. Most came to buy some cheap goods to resell for a quick buck. One lady 'just wanted a couch'

Inside, the halls still echoed from the moment the news hit, shadows of the moment still visible in the form of half-finished drinks cans and personal belongings abandoned on employee desks. Acclaim's Long Island headquarters didn't house any game development, at least not in its latter days, so it was the desks of the surprisingly large quality assurance department on the ground floor that were left cluttered with signed Anthrax posters and photos of Sarah Michelle Geller. Beta discs of games like *The Red Star* and *Juiced* lay around, haphazardly, waiting in vain to have their bugs ironed out. THQ is publishing the latter now, but we may unfortunately never hear from the former again.

The vast financial department on the second floor was littered with halogen lamps, scruffy calculators and tomes full of the company's



The opulence of the executive offices is a stark contrast to the cramped conditions of the QA department downstairs. It's easy to imagine news of the bankruptcy sweeping from one to the other

OUT THERE

HOAX INTERVIEW SHOWS YAMAUCHI'S BALLS

It's a testimony to Hiroshi Yamauchi's steely reputation that the daft statements attributed to him in a faked interview with Wired were taken seriously by some gullible types for even a heartbeat. The 'scans' of the article, which were designed to look as though they had been pulled from an upcoming issue of the magazine, appeared on a Spanish gaming website (www.gamerah.com/noticias.php?bias=180#180) and quickly spread across the internet.

Things Yamauchi never actually said included: "I stood on my chair and said to him in English: 'Hey Ballmer, why don't you suck my yellow balls'," "Look at the PSP. It's shaped like a penis," and "Kirby now looks a bit dated and, let's be honest, homosexual." Hilarious, no? Mmm.

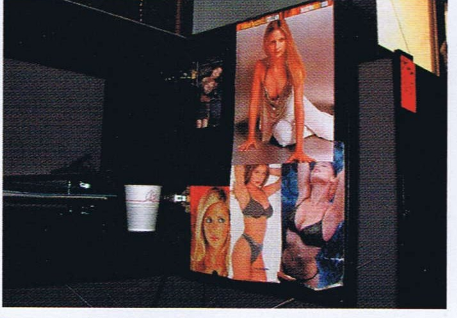
www.gamerah.com




Some sights at Acclaim's HQ were rare glimpses into a secret world. Others, like boxes of unsold *Turok: Rage War* carts (top), were things you could see in any game shop stock room

records: elaborate documentation of what, exactly, had gone wrong. Attempts to snoop through these were met, unsurprisingly, with threats of arrest. Investor records were preserved upstairs, where expensive antique furniture, bottles of fine wine and a concentration of security guards were the norm – a contrast to the gloom of the QA division.

By the time of its downfall, Acclaim had a tarnished reputation, dulled by its eagerness to use sex and scandal to sell low-quality games. However, picking through the detritus it left behind revealed a human side it's all too easy to forget. For all its failings, Acclaim had been an integral part of many gamers' lives and – for better or for worse – a vital piece in gaming's illogical puzzle. It's hard to imagine that anyone wanted to see it end like this.


The speed with which employees had to leave the building is clear from the number of momentos that had to be left behind

Newswire

Ubisoft cries liberte over EA bid

Electronic Arts' recent spate of outright acquisitions took a turn to 'investment' in late December as it announced its intent to purchase a 19.9 per cent stake in Ubisoft. Though not enough to give the superpublisher a controlling stake in Ubisoft, the European publisher responded with a statement that it considered EA's purchase as 'hostile'.

The French media has suggested that both the French government and fellow French-headquartered publisher Vivendi were in talks to defend Ubisoft against a takeover, though Vivendi declined to comment on this report. In a further show of French solidarity, Atari/Infogrames CEO Bruno Bonnell also stated in a Reuters interview that his company would be willing to aid Ubisoft if requested.

Ubisoft share prices have risen with each new development, rumour or not, in anticipation of a bidding war between the European publishers and EA. Meanwhile, EA's other troubled European buyout, a 90 per cent share acquisition of Swedish *RalliSport* and *Battlefield* developer Digital Illusions CE, remains uncertain after a revolt by two groups of shareholders.

EVENT

US PSP details AWOL

Fear of launching in Las Vegas as Sony Computer Entertainment America's PSP event leaves most questions unanswered

SCEA's show was not actually part of CES – avoiding having to share schedule space with Microsoft – but capitalised on the attendant crowds

In an event that was characteristic of the generally underwhelming 2005 Consumer Electronics Show running nearby, Sony's North American PSP press conference, held on January 5, was heavy on fighting rhetoric – including SCEA president **Kaz Hirai**'s proclamation that "Sony will elevate portable entertainment out of the handheld gaming ghetto" – but light on concrete details.

Despite the expectation that the system's launch date and price would be announced at the slickly produced Hard Rock Hotel showing, SCEA seemed to follow its parent company's TGS 2004 showing to the letter, with neither subject addressed. While the probability of a March launch was alluded to, there were no details on how closely the US PSP pricing would mirror the aggressive nature of the Japanese plan.

Software announcements were equally sparse, with no new firstparty titles shown other than beta code of SCEJ's *Ape Escape* platformer. It seems the US launch will be bolstered by Japanese and European titles, with *Ridge Racers* and *Wipeout Pure* shown prominently to positive reception, and commitment from Capcom and Konami to localise two games reviewed this issue – *Metal Gear Acid*, *Vampire Chronicle* (confusingly still under its original title, rather than *Darkstalkers 3*) – and firstperson shooter *Coded Arms*.

However, Sony Online Entertainment took the opportunity to unveil a new PSP franchise, *Untold Legends: Brotherhood Of The Blade* – a multiplayer hack-and-slasher using Snowblind's *Champions Of Norrath* engine, but developed internally at SOE. Set to be available at the console's launch, it's a promising original title, if one with an instantly familiar set-up.

Electronic Arts' software announcements at a follow-up event on January 6 were also overfamiliar, but the quantity showed that the company's interest in the machine had been piqued: six PSP projects were shown, with *Need For Speed Underground Rivals* joined by sports titles *FIFA Football*, *MVP Baseball*, *Tiger Woods PGA Tour*, *NBA Street: Showdown* (working title) and *NFL Street 2: Unleashed*.

INDUSTRY

Aussies Abroad Anyone?

GDAA President Adam Lancman opens a new local industry column with an invitation to join compatriots at GDC 2005



This year is already shaping up to be a big one with many game studios in Australia growing, hiring talent and working on a range of titles across key platforms. The Game Developers' Association of Australia (GDAA) is focused on working with industry to address these talent requirements and ensure we continue to grow our talent pool going forward. To this end, the GDAA has delivered a number of programs in this area, including the Business and Project Management Program and development of a professional development model for teachers in the game sector.

Also critical during this transition phase is the continued need for our industry to ensure we maintain a high profile in the global market place. The GDAA will again, with Government support, host The Great Aussie BBQ: The Sequel in San Francisco, 10 March, during GDC. We're also co-ordinating the Australian presence at E3, where our industry will showcase product in West Hall, Booth #2240. This year will be the largest ever show for Australia and we're looking forward to increasing deal flow, attracting talent and showcasing our best product.

Adam Lancman
President, GDAA



Australian games in development

Blue Tongue	**Nicktoons (PS2, GBA, GC, DS)**
Fuzzyeyes Studio	**Hot Dogs Hot Gals (PC)**
Infinite Interactive	**Seven Kingdoms: Conquest (PC)**
Infinite Interactive	**Warlords Champions (PC)**
Irrational Games	**Freedom Force vs 3rd Reich (PC)**
Iron Monkey Studios	**Darkenlight (PS2)**
Ratbag	**Unannounced (PS2)**
Perception	**Stargate SG-1 (PS2, Xbox, PC)**
Perception	**Unannounced (PS2, Xbox, PS3)**
Tantalus	**Trick Star (GBA)**
Tantalus	**Pit Runner (Working) (N-gage)**
Tantalus	**MX (Working) (PSP)**
Tantalus	**Metal Shell (PSP)**
TheyerGFX	**3D Kit Builder (PC)**
THQ - Studio Australia	**SpongeBob SquarePants (Working) (DS, PSP)**



Irrational Games - Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich (PC). Due this year.

Continue

Eight-DS jams
Band Brothers' party-game longevity grows

Christmas in games
All over now, but did you see *WOW*'s Santa Claus?

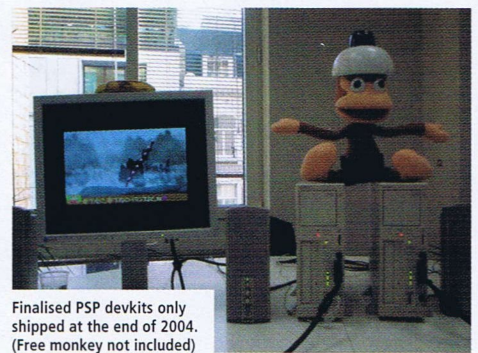
Our Christmas gifts
Thanks to everyone who sent us piles of presents

Quit

The wiping obsession
PSP's screen brings with it an urge to keep it sparkly

Corrupted save files
That's 75 hours' worth of *San Andreas* gone, then

Greg Howson
Call us and we'll give you some importers' numbers



Finalised PSP devkits only shipped at the end of 2004. (Free monkey not included)

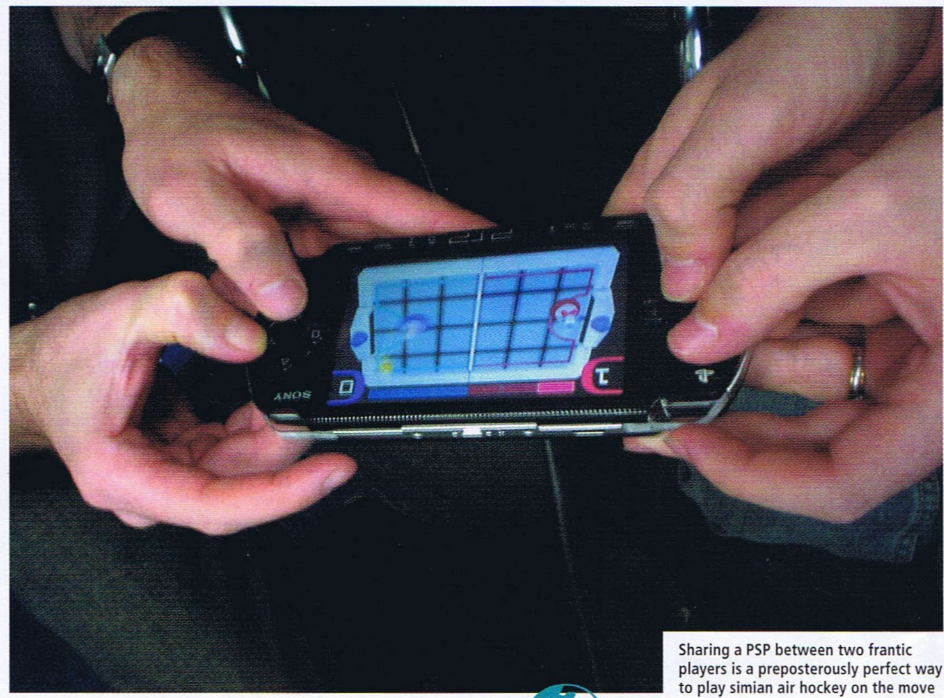


INTERVIEW

For the love of games

The man behind Ape Academy explains why monkey business is the secret of a happy union

If you were asked to name the themes behind the *Ape Escape* series, you would think of pants, bananas and machine guns. A chance to discuss the apes' new PSP incarnation – minigame masterclass *Ape Academy* – with creator **Hiroyuki Kotani** reveals that there's a much more heartfelt agenda behind the game.



Sharing a PSP between two frantic players is a preposterously perfect way to play simian air hockey on the move

It seems that Sony has been encouraging PSP developers to think very hard about how people will play differently on a personal, portable console rather than on one they play at home. How did that affect the design of *Ape Academy*?
The PSP offers flexibility to play anytime, anywhere with the same spec as PS2.This title was created so people would be able to enjoy a high-quality game even if they haven't got much time to play. In addition, many male gamers in Japan tend to be troubled by their girlfriends because they get too involved in games. The theme of the game was to make a title that helps increase the communication between them and their girlfriends.

What inspired you to make games that let two people play on one PSP?
In the past, I have experienced times when I've been irritated at not being able to hold my girlfriend's hand. One PSP held by two people can not only shorten the distance between the two but will also shorten the distance of their feelings. I would like to devote this game to guys out there in the world with pure hearts like me – who can't hold their girlfriends' hands.

What have you enjoyed most about designing for the PSP?
The most thrilling experience of my life was in the last month before the release of this title in Japan when I worked all day and night, without any rest or sleep, without leaving the office at all! But seriously, I am very honoured to have been able to take part in this project for hardware of the highest spec ever, and the unknown possibilities that it has, and to make the best of the portability of PSP. (Although my girlfriend almost dumped me for it!)



Ape Academy's minigames have a number of different guises, calling on you to 'olé!' passing bulls, as well as guarding giant bananas and running very, very, very short races

In recent years games have become very focused on being like films or like real life. Do you think there's a new trend for games which are just 'pure' videogames?
I believe entertainment will break up into pieces as it broadens. Many Japanese enjoy 'pure' games on their mobile phones. At the same time, many enjoy games that are more like movies on their PS2 at home. But don't forget the time with your girlfriend! Games are necessary to keep the 'pure' feeling within yourself, like how you felt when you met your girlfriend for the first time.

How much of the PSP's potential do you think *Ape Academy* uses?
I am not sure how much of the PSP's potential was used, but there is a lot of flexibility of the concept. With *Ape Academy*, the gameplay is the key focus, not the graphics, but it is a lot of fun – it's humorous just by looking at it. It can be enjoyed with one player or two, and offers battle mode using the 'ad hoc' wireless function. The greatest potential, as far as the team is concerned, is the fun it can offer to many gamers. Please play this game with your girlfriend!

OUT THERE

SHOOT TO KILL

Live-Shot is a self-professed 'new concept' in internet gaming. We can't disagree, as we've never seen another site offering you remote control over a distant firearm before, let alone one that promises you the chance to point, click and gun down far-away animals. The guns are mounted at a secluded ranch in – where else? – Texas, along with a host of web cameras that allow you to view the range's inhabitants before you execute them. Animals as disparate as sheep, antelope and, ah, more sheep can be viewed, gunned down and (for a premium fee, obviously) their carcasses retrieved for trophies. All very wholesome, we're sure, and a fine, bloody, destructive way to spend those skillz you've been honing in *Counter-Strike*.

● www.live-shot.com

INTERVIEW

Beating the jungle telegraph

The creators of the world's first bongo-driven platformer, **Takao Shimizu** (producer) and **Yoshiaki Koizumi** (game designer), talk about the ideas behind DK: Jungle Beat

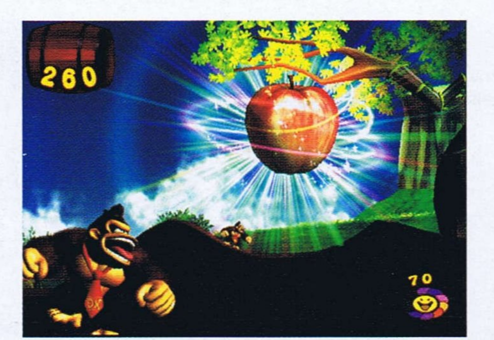
J*ungle Beat* proved a surprise hit at E3. Were you surprised at how warmly the game was received?
Well, what we were trying to make and show was unprecedented gameplay, so I can't imagine how this type of interface was foreseen by the visitors. However, we believe that this game would be pretty much fun for anybody to play with, so that the warm acceptance it received was something which we were very delighted about.

Why are there suddenly so many Donkey Kong games? Was there a deliberate decision inside Nintendo to try to raise his profile, or is it just coincidence?
Just a few years ago we had a 20-year anniversary of Donkey Kong, the original *Donkey Kong* game, but we really didn't do anything about it. A little later, Mr Miyamoto approached us and said that we should have done something, that we should have celebrated Donkey Kong. He didn't make any request to us to make any specific games, but I believe he was taking an opportunity to say to us all that we should have made something to celebrate this anniversary. Now, we happened to be starting to make the action game based upon Donkey Kong already at that time, but I believe that other people were encouraged to feature him in their games. So I think it was a partial coincidence and partial intention on the part of Mr Miyamoto.

How did the idea come about to display Donkey Kong at the front of the screen?
Our objective was to use the bongos to produce simple control in the style of a 2D game. So in order to make that work, we needed to show where the player is heading, what's above and ahead of him, what objects there are to get rid of. But if you are going to do that, naturally your player character becomes smaller and smaller.

"In other games which use the bongo controller, you have to move to the rhythm provided by software. In *Jungle Beat*, you create your own sound by moving the character"

That's kind of a shame, because Donkey Kong has a very rich range of expressions and he wants to show off his hot, cool moves. So in order to establish both these things, we incorporated this style of presentation.



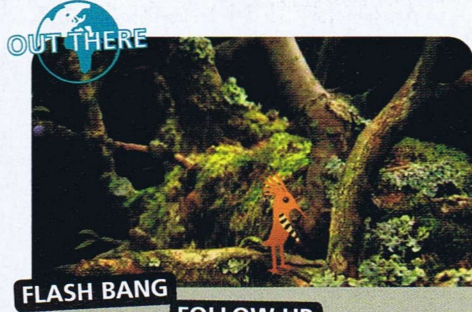
The usual presentation of *Jungle Beat* means that Kong is a tiny figure in the centre of the screen. Duplicating him at the front of the screen conveys the full force of his punchy personality

How difficult was it to design the sound effects of the game, since the players are making their own?
That's a very good question because music and sounds are a part of the whole game experience. We had to resolve many issues in order to come up with very good solutions in the end. In other games which use the bongo controller, you have to move to the rhythm provided by software. In *Jungle Beat*, you create your own sound by moving the character. In other words, the sounds are generated as a result of your moving the character, and that's not all – the music is generated to fit round the player, to excite them as they play.

When you decided to make a game using the bongos, were there other prototypes that you rejected?
We tried some more complicated things. As you know, the bongos can capture sound through their microphone. So technically speaking it is possible that you can use the volume of sound to control how high Donkey Kong jumps. We tried it, but it was rather difficult to gauge how high you wanted him to jump, so in the end we have abandoned that idea.

And how do you see people playing the game? Is it something people enjoy on their own, or best played in a group?
We really don't have the so-called independent multiplayer mode for *Jungle Beat*, but I believe that the game can be enjoyed by a group of people enjoying together. Since the bongo controller includes the microphone for when one player is playing, others like parents, friends or lovers can help him by clapping their hands.

OUT THERE



FLASH BANG FOLLOW-UP

Jakub Dvorský, best known for his gorgeous Flash game *Samorost*, has recently returned again with some new works. Earlier in 2004, glee-club rockers The Polyphonic Spree recruited Dvorský to create a promotional game for their latest album Together We're Heavy. Though a bit shorter, all of the elements that made *Samorost* so compelling were intact, further bolstering hopes that we'll see something more feature length from him in our lifetimes. All of his works can be seen on his website, including his ill-conceived ad piece for Nike, about which we can only say we hope he was paid handsomely.

● www.amanitadesign.com



A DEVELOPER'S DIARY

Ninja Theory's Tameem Antoniades continues his next-gen push

At the end of *Kung Fu Chaos*, and out of the blue, our team pitched in so that Nina, Mike and I could go out and enjoy a lovely meal in appreciation of our contribution. Now, in early 2005, those days seem far, far away.

Not everyone likes change and some people really, really hate it. And we were about to face the biggest change in game development since we went from 2D to 3D.

What if the basic tools you have been using for 10+ years, like Maya, are no longer up to the job?

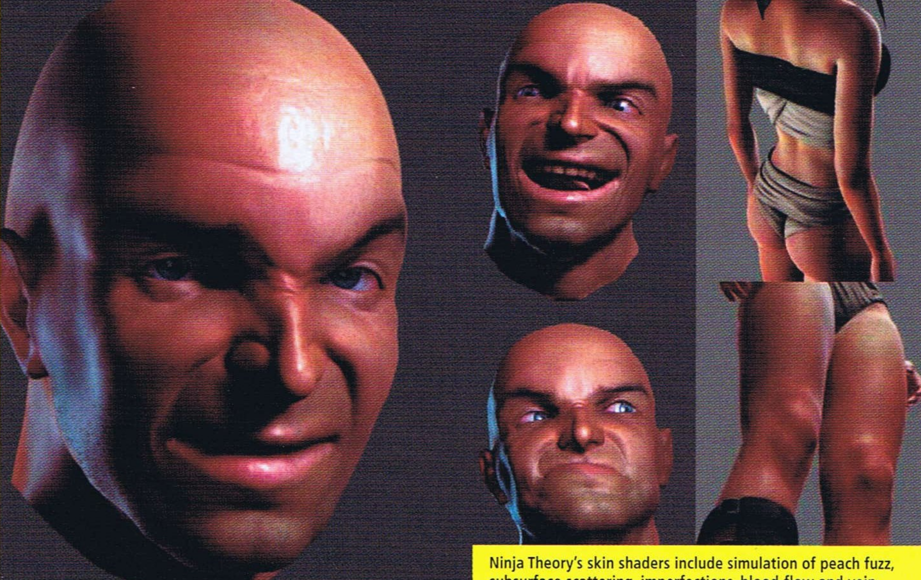
What happens when you set sky-high standards for the team that are entirely speculative?

Or when you ask team members whose last game was an irreverent kung-fu parody to switch to something serious and 'realistic'?

And what do you do when the standards of work required reach levels that are beyond the abilities of someone on your team?

I could list a hundred more issues like the ones above. The sum of them, I feel, means that this

This transition to next-gen is the hardest one yet. I remember when moving to a next-gen platform would be a thrilling and exciting proposition for everyone



Ninja Theory's skin shaders include simulation of peach fuzz, subsurface scattering, imperfections, blood-flow and vein distribution in realtime without using standard slow solutions

transition to next-gen is the hardest one yet. I remember when moving to a next-gen platform would be a thrilling and exciting proposition for everyone. Goodbye, good old days!

You have a transition here that is much more about people than the technical, creative and work-flow challenges. When change comes, some people get unhappy. One or two unhappy people can spread their unhappiness until everyone becomes unhappy.

People tried to make it work and to generally accommodate our unhappiest people in an attempt to make them happy again. And in all instances it did - nothing but prolong the agony for everyone.

The fact is that someone who wants to make a cartoony game will never be happy making a realistic one regardless of the reasons behind the decision. Someone who was hired for their skills in a specific style of game may not be suited for a completely different style of game. I made mistakes, too. Some of the formal processes I introduced that were designed to allow the team to scale up in size created lots of dependencies. In turn, this stifled the creative processes that allow small teams to achieve big things.

Company meetings were punctuated by people unhappy about this, that and the other. Achievements were belittled at every turn and it was so unfair to the people who did so much to make things work. To compound this, there was so much up-front investment in technology that there was no visible progress apparent for months. It was a real low point for everyone.

In the end, we stopped trying to make unhappy people happy and let them leave. This would either rip us apart or make us stronger. And leave they did. One person left, then another, then another. It's horrible to see people you have worked with for so long leave but we had to let them. Over the course of the first nine months of *Heavenly Sword* we must have lost more of our staff than we had in the previous three years. And you know what? It wasn't the end of the world.

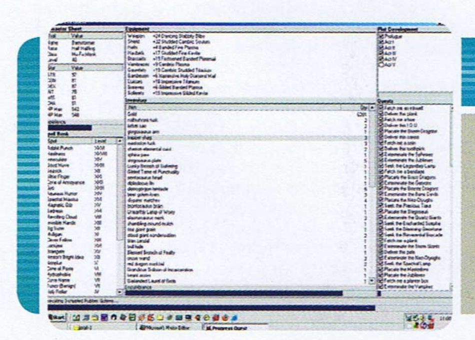
We luckily managed to find really great people to fill in the holes and pick up the pieces. Our leads stayed true and professional throughout and kept the train from derailing. Other team members took on extra responsibility and kept the momentum going.

Slowly, the mood started to change. It took a long time but we hit our stride again. The team was working as a unit and ambition and cooperation were coming back to the fore again. It's a credit to the team that they were able to overcome the many low points and make us stronger than ever before.

We pressed on with the prototype. So many areas were being worked on at once but nothing was working together. 2004 arrived. We booked our flights and publisher meetings for the Game Developers Conference in March. We simply had to get the prototype working before then and it had to be spectacularly good.

Finally, we got a build that ran smoothly and was stable. It took 23 people nine months to create. But was it good enough? Does it look next-gen? Does it play well enough? How will publishers react? Well, I was about to find out.

We borrowed a small PC, stuffed it with the fastest kit we could get our hands on, overclocked the processor and boarded our flight to the States. I'm not superstitious, but boy was I touching wood everywhere I went!



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Progress Quest

www.progressquest.com

Progress Quest may just be the ultimate MMOG. With an epic plot spanning dozens of chapters, a dazzling variety of character types, a complex system of spell and special attack upgrades and a lively community with a wide choice of guilds, you could hardly be better set.

Written by a singularly small team, *PQ* demonstrates a more comprehensive grasp of the essential dynamics of the RPG than even the very finest examples produced by legends like Square or BioWare. It's hard to describe the feeling of nonchalant triumph as your character makes his way back to town and sells off his booty. Even better, despite its almost universal appeal, *PQ* isn't a life-swallower, allowing you to multitask and even get some sleep while your character's heroics continue. All this, and it's entirely free.

Longterm *PQ*ers may have a bit of a headstart on you, but thanks to its unique gameplay it should be no effort at all to catch them up. Give it a few months and you might even scale the heights of our Talking Pony Tickle-Mimic.

INCOMING

Announcements and updates

Phantom Dust

FORMAT: XBOX
PUBLISHER: MAJESCO
EXPECTED: 2005



In lieu of Microsoft bringing MS Japan's acclaimed online psychic brawler to the west, Majesco have signed it up – which should hopefully bump the game's Live population into triple digits

Raiden 3

FORMAT: ARCADE
PUBLISHER: TAITO
EXPECTED: 2005



A new, polygonal instalment of Seibu Kaihatsu's venerable shooter begins the year's Type-X shooter flood. We're not convinced green's a good look for the Toothpaste Laser, though

Champions: Return To Arms

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
EXPECTED: MARCH 2005



Just as Snowblind's *Champions Of Norrath* follow-up looks to improve on the original's flaws, Ubi is also improving on the localisation time, with a near-simultaneous PAL release

Stella Deus: The Gate Of Eternity

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: ATLUS USA
EXPECTED: Q2 2005



Atlus' sprawling, all-star development team's strategy-RPG is confirmed for an American release, hopefully with a localisation that does better justice to its script than the off-the-peg subtitle

Dance Dance Revolution With Mario

FORMAT: GC
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
EXPECTED: JUNE 2005



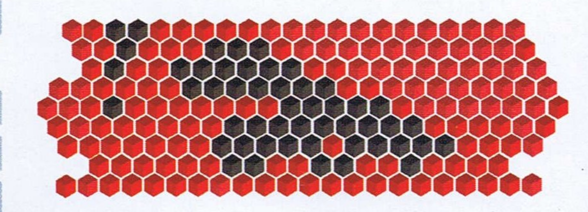
Mario, you just keep unfolding like a flower. The plumber of many talents breaks into the *DDR* scene in a Konami/Nintendo collaboration featuring both mat-thumping and new minigames

Pokémon

FORMAT: GC
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
EXPECTED: 2005



From *Pokémon Colosseum* creator Genius Sonority comes a 'true' *Pokémon* for GameCube, with an original storyline, cast, and new pocket monsters to catch in addition to the old guard



REDEYE IS…

Installing Half-Life 2



The lights on the modem flash send and receive, but still nothing. Come on, come on, it's not like RedEye's getting any younger. Actually, it turns out he is, after a childhood accident involving a Back To The Future video and an unfortunately timed lightning strike. Gene sequence spliced with a supernova and Doc Emmet Brown's mad science, he glitches in and out of ages like skyscrapers in *San Andreas*. It only happened because the VHS was one of the first with copy protection, back when home videotaping was killing the fatcat movie industry, long before suprnova.org actually did. It didn't stop copying, just occasionally screwed up the tracking on legitimate copies, leading to fury from honest customers who'd paid for redundant goods, and a stupid, youthful RedEye trying to solve the problem logically by shoving his hand in a player still wired to the mains. Whirr, crack, kaboom: Great Scott!

The profit-making pirates were unaffected, of course – their technology was always on a generational par with the movie studios, and besides they had enough contacts to get prints before the copy protection was ever applied. This is not an unfamiliar story; videogame fans have been dealing with similar irritations for 20 years, from words in manuals and codewheels, through density-based copylock to 25-digit serial numbers. Now Valve has upped the ante, because super-smash **Edge** 10/10 *Half-Life 2* won't let you play without laborious online authentication. RedEye's been patiently waiting to authenticate for 35 minutes, and, y'know, he's not getting any younger.

Personal frustrations at wanting everything now-now-now aside, this is not black and white. On the one hand, publishers crushing plucky developers with cynically calculated, barely legal late payments has been something of a motif for the industry of late, and a story about a plucky developer creating its own distribution method and royally shafting a publisher could prove uplifting. On the other, being unable to play the game you've just bought until you've taken a military-grade security test to prove you've bought it is as demeaning as it is frustrating. On the one hand anyone with any sense wants a greater slice of the profit to go to the creatives. On the other, there's no proof yet that this will stop piracy any more than the codewheels, any more than the VHS methods that started the chain that messed up RedEye's DNA.

Upping the stakes: on the one hand, *Half-Life 2* is awesome, apparently; RedEye still wouldn't know, but he's heard tell from people more grounded in PC patience than he is. On the other is personal freedom. Precedents are dangerous, and even if Valve's system is flawless, the prospect of, say, Vivendi taking Valve's lead and installing its own authentication system on RedEye's already-quaking PC is absolutely terrifying. Punishing protection will only go away if users refuse to buy into it. RedEye picks his side, cancels the installation, and makes a stand.

*RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with those of **Edge** magazine*

THQ

Save the World

Coin & Cleavage

The Bard's Tale™

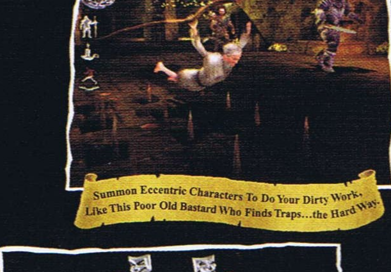
Coming Soon

"...Right Now, There Is No Other Game In The Genre That Looks Remotely As Good."
– PSM

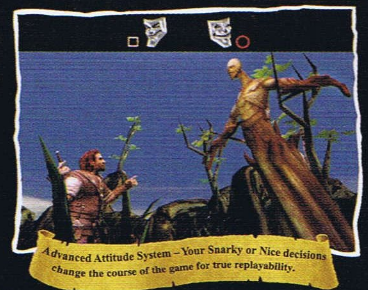
"...It Has Skyrocketed To The Top Of My Most-Wanted Games List."
– Gamespy

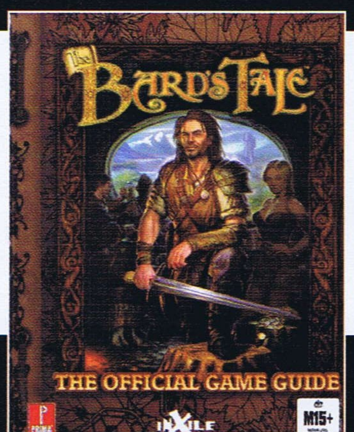
"Turning RPG Clichés On Their Head."
– Electronic Gaming Monthly

"...Intelligent Scriptwriting And A Well-Developed Sense Of Humor."
– GamePro


Summon Eccentric Characters To Do Your Dirty Work, Like This Poor Old Bastard Who Finds Traps...the Hard Way.


Less A, More I – Don't Underestimate Your Crafty Opponents


Advanced Attitude System – Your Snarky or Nice decisions change the course of the game for true replayability.



Preorder at EB GAMES electronics boutique and receive The Bards Tale Prima Guide*

(* while stocks last - conditions apply.)





PlayStation 2





The new World Of WarCraft order

Looking back at, and forward from, the WOW launch with Jeffrey Kaplan, lead world content and raid designer at Blizzard



How did you all spend launch day? Were the celebrations tempered at all by the fact that going gold is just the beginning for the game?
Most of us spent it in a very tired state. Fry's Electronics in Fountain Valley, southern California, held a midnight signing, and about 5,000 people showed up to get their copies of *WOW* autographed by the development team. We were there until almost 5am. Launch day was spent monitoring the servers, working on the upcoming patch, playing *World Of WarCraft* (of course), and trying to keep our eyes open.

Did anyone on the team manage to spend the Thanksgiving holiday without logging on at least once?
I can't speak for the rest of the team, but I know I spent a good part of my Thanksgiving in Azeroth.

Though the project has endured everything from internet forum flames to tornadoes, were there ever points during development where you felt you'd bitten off more than you could chew? What kept the team going?
Our team has certainly undergone a lot, but we knew we had a great game on our hands – we've been playing it internally for years. We knew the potential, as well as the opportunity, before us. It was also important to deliver a product worthy of the Blizzard reputation, as there were scores of Blizzard fans and MMO fans counting on us to produce something special. When there are so many people interested in what you are doing, it makes you want to work harder. And working on this development team is a privilege. Knowing that you are working with the best programmers, designers and artists to create content for the game only makes each individual raise their contribution even more. People use the cliché 'trial by fire', but we've survived 'trial by tornado' – we're ready for anything now!



Has the ongoing, upgradeable nature of the MMO made it easier to draw a line under *WOW* development and release it? Or were you still fighting the urge to keep adding new content right until the end?
We're never satisfied. I would be worried if we were. We don't talk about *WOW* as a thing of the past around here: we spend our time planning for future content and features. Even before the game

> **"We want Azeroth to evolve and grow, and to remain exciting and fun for our players. And at the end of the day, the game is just too much fun to work on to not keep adding content"**

was shipped, we had features designed and tasked that we knew would be post-release updates. We want Azeroth to evolve and grow, and mostly to remain exciting and fun for our players. And at the end of the day, the game is just too much fun to work on not to keep adding content.

How have the entirely fresh players, who haven't had the acclimatisation of playing in the beta, been taking to the game?
They seem to be taking to it quite well, and it's exciting to see players who have never played an MMO before running around, experiencing the game for the first time. The game is very accessible to those who have no previous experience. An early design goal was to have the first play session



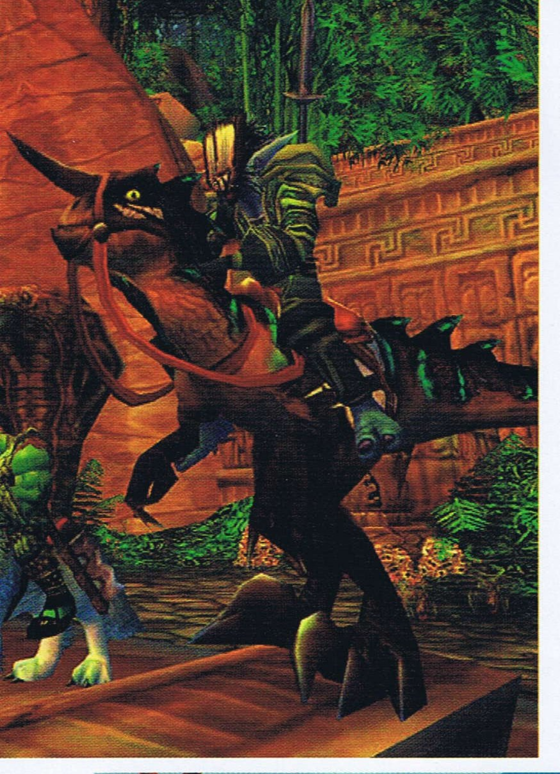
Two-hundred thousand accounts were created on *WOW*'s first day, with the 40 launch servers hastily doubled to meet demand so players weren't forced to deal with latency issues

be easy and rewarding, while at the same time teaching players the basic mechanics of an MMO. I think that's one area where we've succeeded.

How much of a development challenge has appealing to both MMO veterans and first-time players proven? Some feel *WOW* tends towards the latter – would you consider that a strength of the game, rather than a failing?
Personally, I felt it was more challenging to create a game that was appealing to first-time players rather than one that appealed to MMO veterans. I say this because I am an MMO veteran, so I know exactly what that crowd is looking for in a game. Oftentimes, on various message boards, I would read some thread saying that *WOW* was too easy – yet no one was able to beat any of our raid content [high-level mass group combat] during the beta. Just because we didn't make levelling up in the game a full-time job doesn't mean that the game lacks challenge. Spending time grinding is not challenging. Using your skill as a player to overcome a challenge is where the fun lies.

In issue 2 Richard Bartle, co-creator of the first MUD, argued that current MMOs suffer from being shaped by the demands of players,







rather than the design team. How resilient do you feel *WOW* has been to the very vocal Blizzard fanbase?**

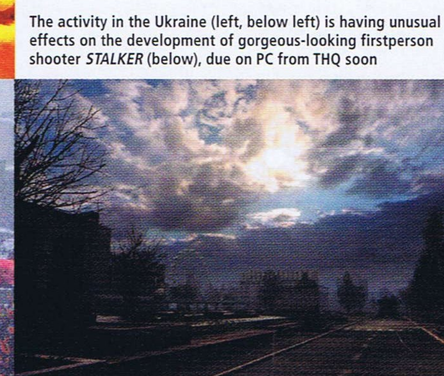
We have a very thick skin here at Blizzard. It's very important to listen to your fans, but at the same time there are things we know about the development process that our fans are not privy to. We've had to make hard calls like implementing a death penalty, item durability or the rest state. Rather than just caving in to your fans and pulling out the features they don't like, it's important to iterate on them until you reach your design goals. It's often an unpleasant process for beta testers, but it's very necessary.

It would be a mistake to always listen to the fanbase and cave in on every issue, just as it would be a mistake to never listen to the players. A good developer knows when to make the right call.

What's next for the *WOW* team – are you all in it for the long haul of building extra content, or will some of you move on to less-fraught standalone projects?

We never even stopped to catch our breath. There's a lot more content and features that we want to deliver, and we've been working on the Battlegournds PvP patch for the game for some time now, before *WOW* even shipped.





The activity in the Ukraine (left, below left) is having unusual effects on the development of gorgeous-looking firstperson shooter *STALKER* (below), due on PC from THQ soon

INTERVIEW

The politics of play

Ukraine's GSC Game World is working on STALKER while the chaos surrounding the disputed election unfolds around them. Oleg Yavorksy, senior PR manager, describes the effects on the game's development

How have the last couple of weeks been for you?

It's been quite a stressful time. Basically, days have looked as follows: morning – in the office; evening – in the streets. Some guys on the team have even gone in shifts during the day to join the protesters in the main square of Kiev.

Have the protests affected development of the game?

Although everybody on the team has been affected by the events, there's hardly been any damage to the development process. The first couple of days were psychologically tough – there was an air of suspense around; everybody feared a civil war or expected some kind of aggression to flare up. The team's reaction was original in a way – we unofficially promised to make one of the candidates into a hideous monster for the game!

Do you think living through recent turmoil like the Chernobyl disaster and the current election crisis affects the themes you chose for your games?

Obviously there's some kind of after effect. It certainly has an impact on the visual design of the games: we prefer greyish and darker tones here, while western Europeans like brighter colours more. I guess that's an impact of the USSR's history, the architecture style of massive concrete structures, the Chernobyl accident and other factors which have influenced the look of our titles.

Do you think the current situation might inspire games you make in the future?

It's definitely possible. Right now we are seeing Ukraine change its outlook. People have awoken to the need to fight for their right to express their opinion, and that's a remarkable process. All the demonstrations throughout Ukrainian cities have been characterised by people's unity and friendliness towards each other – something I've never seen before personally. So, they should probably get us to make the next *Freedom Fighters* game! The country is moving towards more transparent politics and democracy, and along with that people's mindsets are changing. Although it's a lengthy process, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel already. So maybe our games will get more orange-coloured in the future!

How do the current events make you feel about videogames? Have they started to feel trivial compared to the realities you're facing, or do they feel even more vital as a form of creative expression?

When the future of your country and your personal future is at stake, you can't think of anything else than this future. Elections and vote rigging have definitely turned into topic number one for all of us here. Nevertheless, with four projects on our hands, we are in no position to relax. Although we can't wait for the elections to be over and things to have changed for the better, work in the development pit doesn't stop.

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

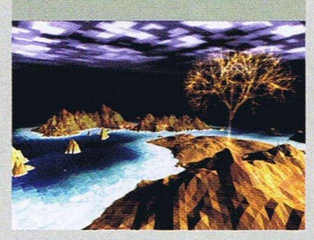
Edge's most wanted

God Of War



David Jaffe's astonishingly violent riff on Grecian myth shows more brutal promise each time we see it, seeming to pull as few punches with substance as it does with style
PS2, SCEA

Darwinia



No local distributor has raised their hand for this uncompromising piece of retro-styled futurist strategy game with a refreshing tactile feel. Get it online.
PC, INTROVERSION SOFTWARE

The Red Star



It should have been a Most Played regular by now. But we haven't lost hope yet that the best title Acclaim never published will still find a well-deserved commercial release
PS2, XBOX, PUBLISHER TBA

The generation game

To develop in interesting times



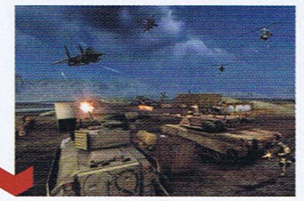
For games developers, it's a case of being careful what they wish for with new hardware, as it just might just all show up at E3

Yuji Naka is exhausted. It's not just the jet-lag, or a hectic 2004 at the head of a multiplatform development studio: it's exhaustion in expectation of the year to come. Two new handhelds and three new consoles, all heavily in mind if not yet in living rooms. In the period where this generation tails off and the next begins there will be ten major platforms – the PC, two Xboxes, three PlayStations, four Nintendo consoles – vying for a thirdparty developer's attention, as well as an increasingly sophisticated mobile gaming market growing out there on the sidelines.

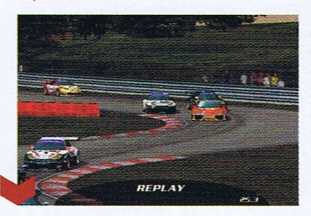
That prospect must temper the thrill of the new with a thrill of horror deeper than a multiplatform gamer's realisation of their monthly spending total. With the considerations of longer development periods for more complex titles to match to sympathetic architecture (and sympathetic audiences), producing absolute innovation as well must seem like a sheet of corrugated iron to crown a house of cards.

Ten platforms in two tenses: does a developer look to future hardware and hope to work *Halo* magic at launch, or to the incumbent formats for a latter-day miracle the likes of *Resident Evil 4*, *Wanda And Colossus* or *Stranger's Wrath*? The former risks the caprices of impatient early adopters – willing to abandon a machine far before the software can prove its potential – and the latter the threat of being shuffled out of the spotlight as the cycle ends.

But for the best developers, these are their kind of odds: the sleep-depriving, relationship-threatening storm before the calm of that gold master that can produce the kinds of games you hadn't thought possible this generation or the next. This will be a good year for hype – and a good year for Hype. An Indian summer for this generation's hardware, an indication of what will define and constrain the output of some very different approaches to handheld gaming, and the first great outstretched toe-dips into gaming's three biggest sequels yet. And, we hope, the opportunity for Naka-san and weary developers from around the globe to book some much needed holiday time.

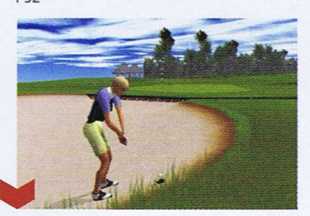
















FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **2005 (TBA)**

Battlefield 2

A new mode should augment the original's wonderful blend of tactics and mayhem. But will the 1942 faithful love it, or is mutiny afoot?

We're in a typically plush EA 'media centre', and a throng of journalists has the choice of asking questions or getting on with a day's playtesting of DICE's *Battlefield 2*. Stupid question. The walk/half-run hurry to the PCs is something to behold, but then this is the sequel to one of the most-played online games ever - a game still popular years after its release.

The name may have been stripped of any fancy sub-titles or dates but the game itself is almost entirely new. At least in terms of technology. Indeed, the no-nonsense moniker reflects *Battlefield*'s popularity – after all, why restrict yourself to one war when you can throw in tanks, jets, APCs, guns and gadgets that cover several decades of modern warfare? The buoyant *Battlefield* mod community will see to those specific wars in any case.

Judging from the pre-alpha code, the non-specificity has done the brand no harm whatsoever. What you get instead is the choice of joining one of three armies – the Chinese, the US or the Russians – to fight in fictional conflicts across the globe. Twelve maps will ship with the boxed copy, and a singleplayer bot-populated campaign is supported, but it's really only thrown in for honing your skills for the 'real' thing – those epic 64-player online skirmishes. DICE dabbled with the idea of bumping it up to 100, but felt the performance hit for most users wasn't worth the effort.

> After all, why restrict yourself to one war when you can throw in tanks, jets, APCs, guns and gadgets

Along with a major graphical, physics and engine overhaul, *Battlefield 2* introduces a new Commander mode to increase tactical options and encourage a more considered approach to warfare. In essence, one player on the team is given privileged access to a set of commands to help plan a concerted team attack, though whether individuals want to take these orders is quite another matter. The commander can view a detailed overhead map, zoom into specific areas, scan for enemies, launch artillery strikes, drop supply boxes, spot and fix enemy vehicles and lay down waypoints and spawn points. Taking on the commander mantle is clearly a huge responsibility, but troops can launch a mutiny if they feel let down by their leader. If only one player wants to be commander then the role automatically transfers; if several go for the top job then the player with the highest rank gets the promotion.

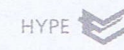
Persistence is also a new theme, and medals and scores accumulated during a game remain with your character. Ranked servers will sort the soldiers out from the





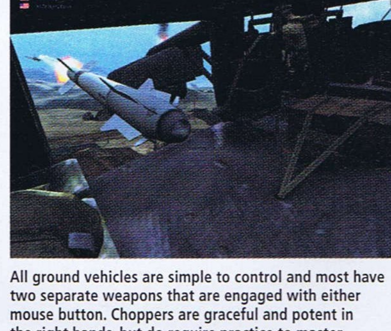


There's a pleasing mixture of urban, military, wetland and forest environments to wage war in. Many of the buildings in urban locations can now be entered, and house sieges are as tense as you would imagine









Commanders get a bird's eye view of the battlefield and can even drop supply boxes on enemies – a direct hit with one will notch up an instant kill. C4 charges can also be attached to enemies with devastating effect

civvies and any antisocial behaviour during games will result in scores plummeting.

It's noticeable that the medic and engineer roles are more rewarding due to a new area of effect design feature. Climb inside an APC and nearby players can be healed or vehicles repaired without you having to get out again. As a medic it's possible to trundle around as a kind of mobile infirmary or get out and shock an enemy to death with your defibrillator paddles. Two new player kits have been added: Spec-ops and Support, the former providing the player with a range of anti-personnel gadgets, the latter a heavy machine gun plus extra ammo to distribute to teammates.

The game comes with voiceover-IP as standard, so plugging in a pair of headphones and a mic gets you communicating with your squadmates instantly. Other improvements include a sprint command (though it's disappointing to discover that you can't look around while running away from danger), a much faster framerate (in the region of 50-plus) and the amphibious nature of APCs.

Thankfully, *Battlefield 2* retains all the drama and intensity of the original, the ability to perform one-man-against-all-the-odds heroic deeds or camp on a hillside with a sniper rifle. It gives you almost limitless choice in how you want to approach the gritty, and often comical, experience of virtual war. The new Commander options give it extra steel; fighting alongside your comrades in well-organised and executed raids offers a different kind of emotional reward to the over-the-top frenzy of *1942*.

Battlefield's success is ultimately down to two things: empowerment and balance. Giving players potent toys to play with is one thing; preventing any one of those elements offering an unfair advantage is quite another. Adding fighter jets to the mix is potentially dangerous (and why isn't EA showing them in this build?). Strafing an enemy compound in an F-15 Eagle, F/A-18 Hornet or a Russian SU-34 is enticing, but relevant checks and balances will have to be made. DICE says jet speed, for instance, will be reduced to help ground troops use SAMs effectively.

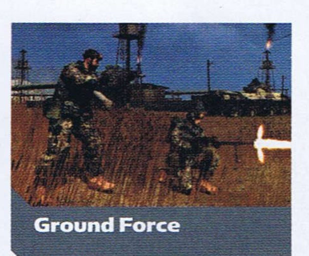
But, in practice, do all these new features, war machines and tactical options improve the experience? Let's just say that the assembled were more worried about the conflict at hand than the prospect of missing the last bus home…

All ground vehicles are simple to control and most have two separate weapons that are engaged with either mouse button. Choppers are graceful and potent in the right hands, but do require practice to master





Burning wrecks will now injure soldiers if they get too close; it's a feature DICE says players have been asking for since the launch of the original *Battlefield 1942*



Ground Force

The *Battlefield 2* world is not the most picturesque on PC, but its graphical detail is now extremely high. The lush grass and rocky hills are not just visual frippery, however: they offer a level of cover that was previously to die for. Hide in foliage and you will not be given away by popping textures, and crouching is a must if you want to make yourself a harder target to both see and hit.

The introduction of ambient sound also keeps you immersed in the world, and birds and wildlife can even give your position away if disturbed.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **VU GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IRRATIONAL**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **APRIL/MAY 2005**

SWAT 4

Last month's superheroic studio Irrational lays down the law in a long-awaited police simulation sequel

The sole included multiplayer map in the closed beta test is a cleverly laid-out courthouse. The police and hostage must ascend three staircases. Thoughtful terrorists will attempt to outflank the party and attack from the rear

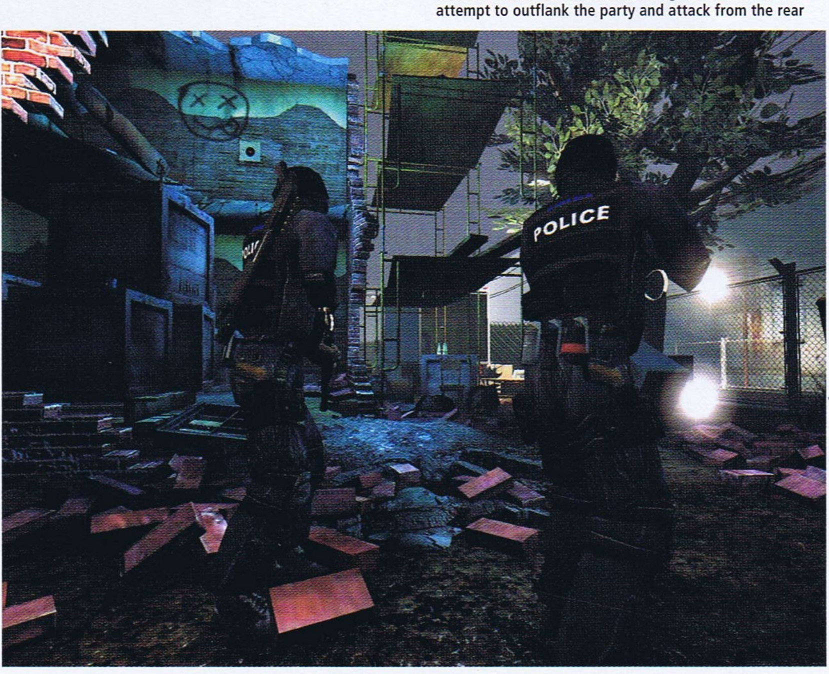




In April 1992, at the height of the LA riots, Rodney King appeared in front of the news cameras, pleading for calm: "Can't we all get along?" A year later, the chief responsible for policing the disastrous peace appeared on the front of game boxes for *Daryl F Gates' Police Quest: SWAT*, and *Daryl F Gates' Police Quest 4: Open Season*. The point of this? Check Google. The internet doesn't remember the botched situation, or the lasting criticism of the LAPD and its eventual reforms. Instead, Gates' lasting claim to fame is as chief technical advisor to a piece of unremarkable digital entertainment. *SWAT 4*, in development at Irrational Software, needs to work hard to leave a similarly lasting impression.

This is a rigorous police simulation at heart, a firstperson shooter obsessed with the dynamics of gunplay, weapon modelling, and procedure. Your goal is to neutralise the targets: placing them under arrest, knocking them out with the Taser or stun guns, or, if all else fails, with a quiet double tap. Frighten a perp into submission and he'll proffer his wrists, ready for handcuffing. A context-sensitive interface allows players to make tactical decisions without resort to police training manuals.

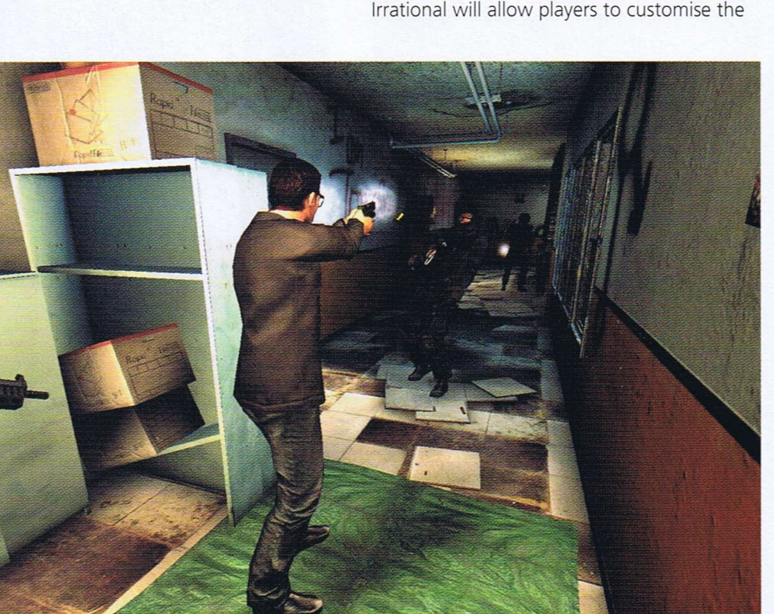
The included career mode provides 12 standalone missions with no over-arching storyline or character progression. Instead, Irrational will allow players to customise the missions according to taste – a hostage here, some criminal elements there, nasty men hiding under or behind a choice of curtains and tables elsewhere.



Level design shows an impressive eye for detail. Many are urban nightmares, from Muzak-infested corporate offices to ghettos. It seems impossible, sometimes, to believe a designer placed the bricks, rather than falling into place naturally

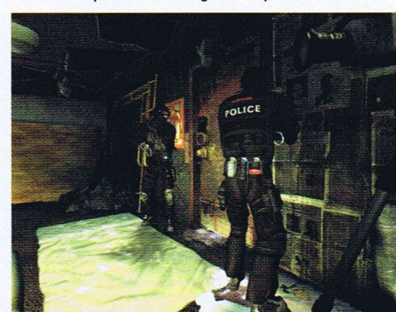
The real highlight is set to be the multiplayer modes, and cooperative play looks like being a major draw. Up to six players can take on the same missions as in the singleplayer game, drawing enemy fire and distracting the AI to allow teammates a clear shot at the target. The online multiplayer offers a twist on an old *Counter-Strike* favourite, as one player takes on the role of hostage while the rest of the players are split into teams of police and terrorists. The police must escort the hostage to a safe zone while the terrorists attempt to capture, rather than kill, him. Once he's brought under control, however, allegiances shift. The police become the assassins, their new mission being to 'neutralise' the VIP, the use of such a clinical term masking just how riotous play then becomes. The wretched hostage is armed with nothing more than a pistol, and must rely on his captors to protect him at all costs.

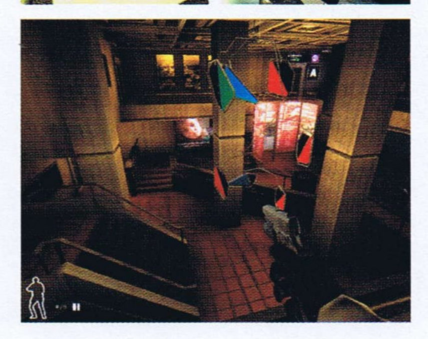
It's new ideas for old forms of play. Like its work on the rejuvenation of the *Tribes* series, Irrational isn't making massive changes. But the tweaks and distinct craftsmanship are creating a better game than what existed before.

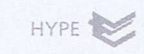


Movement is exceedingly slow, even with the included sprint key. Doorways become major choke-points, since there's no way to leap around the corner, spraying the room with an unofficial MP5 knockoff

The cooperative mode will allow for improvised tactics. The idea is not to replicate police strategy entirely, but to give the player the feeling of authenticity. The slow movement speed and chilling radio squawks nail this









Injured troopers will use medical stations autonomously in quiet periods, but never make unprompted fighting withdrawals

Star Wars: Republic Commando

Even with the benefit of some impressive antipodean drawls, this doesn't seem to be the Star Wars game we were looking for

FORMAT: **PC, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E1**

The trouble with *Republic Commando* has always been encapsulated in that visor. It doesn't fail to fulfill its role as HUD readout or screen furniture, but where *Metroid Prime* used one to magnify the atmosphere, *Republic Commando*'s shields you from it, distancing your faceless clone trooper from his squad of faceless clone troopers and the already unengaging aesthetic of the Star Wars prequels.

It's a brave choice to cast a Star Wars game with the very kit-set hordes that exist as the backdrop for its larger-than-life heroes and villains, and *Republic Commando* doesn't show much evidence of justifying it. Each member of your four-clone squad has a personality – as assembly-line as their bodies, though it's hardly fair to complain about archetypes considering the source material – but they only amount to endlessly repeating, often ill-fitting soundbites that trail *Halo*'s camaraderie (though your character fares slightly better thanks to Temuera Morrison's authoritatively clipped New Zealand vowels). In all but radio chatter, your companions are indistinguishable, which at least makes ordering them about in the heat of battle a simple matter of first come, first assigned.

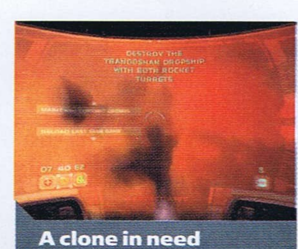
The command system remains elegant, with a single button press assigning or pulling back troopers from context-sensitive positions, but it's also beginning to feel limited. As your squad can only be ordered to take predetermined suppressing fire or sniping points, the only real skill in commanding them seems to be finding and filling those positions as quickly as possible. And though it's a satisfying spectacle when a battle plan is enacted, your squad decisively routing enemy advances with the precision their trigger-happy filmic counterparts never demonstrated, it's not *your* plan.



Your melee attack, a nasty jab with a spring-loaded wrist blade, is powerful but has the drawback of splattering your visor with ichor for a few seconds

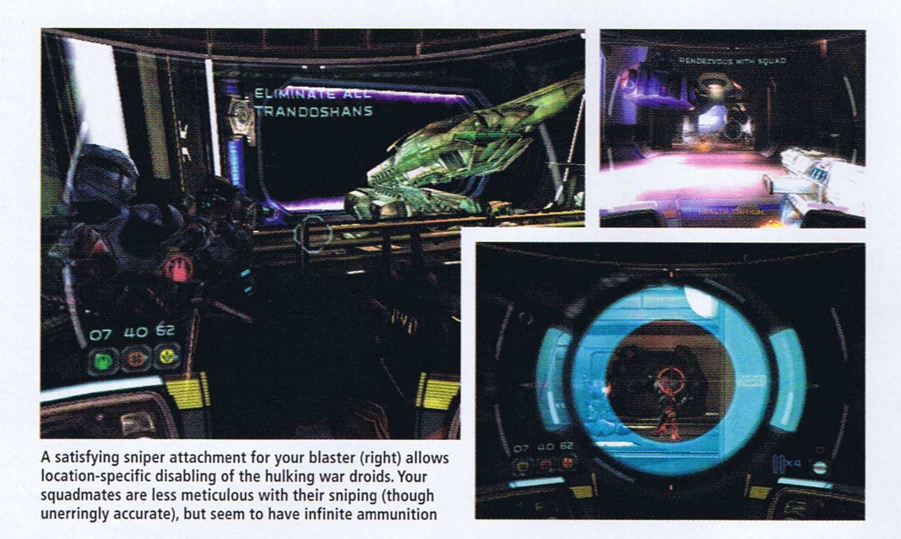
In the best setpieces, when you're racing against time, overwhelmed by enemies and the soundtrack is swelling – when it feels like you're part of a Star Wars battle, in other words – this lack of control is less perceptible, but elsewhere it seems there's too much method and not enough madness. The solo sections should offer a break from regime, but on early evidence even these have been plotted out well in advance, with internal monologue-instructed progression and fortuitous positioning of explosive barrels.

The overall experience is reminiscent of The Phantom Menace: there's little to criticise technically, but much to lament in its vacuousness. LucasArts has mistaken formulaic heroism-by-numbers for the real thing, and the Xbox version may find itself in the position of being the lesser of two space operas, as both *Halo*s are so much more convincingly sci-fi matinee in nearly every fashion. Perhaps the remaining development time can coax out the Star Wars magic, but otherwise this will be a safe, functional, unremarkable shooter: an unfortunate return to pre-*KOTOR* form.



A clone in need

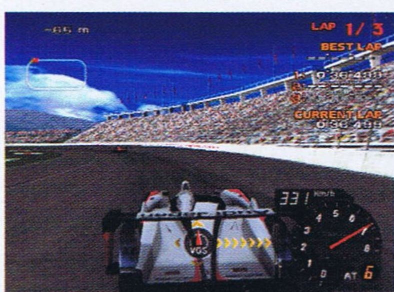
Being downed on the battlefield isn't the end, provided at least one of your squad is still standing to revive you. They will attempt to clear the area of hostiles before coming to your aid, unless you order them to revive you under fire and risk losing them in the process. The anxious wait as you watch the battle play out through a red haze is, at the risk of sounding like a backhanded compliment, one of *Republic Commando*'s most memorable aspects.



A satisfying sniper attachment for your blaster (right) allows location-specific disabling of the hulking war droids. Your squadmates are less meticulous with their sniping (though unerringly accurate), but seem to have infinite ammunition


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Races across gravel or countryside almost get the heart racing, but at the moment *Enthusia* is something of a halfway house. It doesn't have the rough and tumble of a rally game or the sliding excesses of a *Ridge Racer*

Enthusia: Professional Racing

The man behind Rage Racer takes the road less travelled

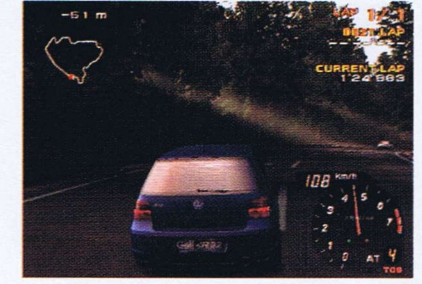
FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

When developers are desperate to make you see how realistic their games are they usually show screenshots of fictional things next to the authentic things. Konami has gone one step further by filming footage of real cars drifting around tracks and juxtaposing them, corner for corner, next to its own in-game footage. There's very little to choose between the representations, of course, but the spot-the-difference game gets tiresome pretty quickly.

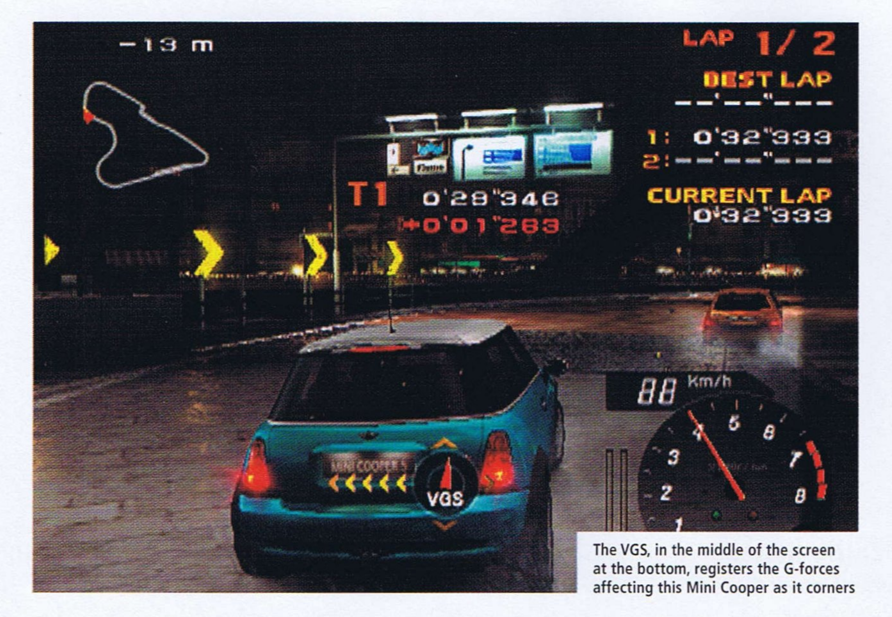
Point made; *Enthusia* has been built not to try emulate *Gran Turismo 4*, but to do realism like no other driving game before. Its key innovation is a driving aid christened the VGS, or Virtual Gravity System. The idea is that players can use the feedback from this meter to drift and power steer around courses with greater precision. In effect, it's a visual representation of the forces that act on the vehicle, and the driver's body.

It's a nice idea in principle, but the VGS currently feels like nothing more than a distraction in the middle of your screen. It's not that the information it imparts appears inaccurate, just that it seems redundant. Take a sharp right-hand corner and the G-forces bearing in on your (virtual) head result in several chevrons poking out to the left of the VGS. The more G-force, the more chevrons. Brake violently into a corner and the chevrons shoot upwards, purportedly representing how close your head is to the windscreen. It's as gimmicky as it sounds.

Of more practicality are the grip indicators, small representations of each tyre that communicate useful information on how much traction you're getting in and out of corners. Because each tyre is independently monitored it's possible to use this information to control drifts, take greater risks and generally drive on the ragged edge.



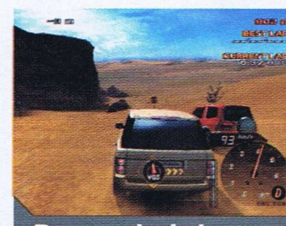
While it doesn't massage the eyeballs with the elegance of *GT4*, *Enthusia* does have its moments. Waterfalls, complete with splash effects, and sunlight dappling through tree branches are just a couple of visual delights



The VGS, in the middle of the screen at the bottom, registers the G-forces affecting this Mini Cooper as it corners

Konami's decision to release a demo with only a Free Ride mode is lamentable as it fails to show *Enthusia*'s potential. A handful of tracks and just one opponent fail to adequately showcase the love and effort from Manabu Akita, *Rage Racer*'s designer. Ironically, there's something a little dead and restrained about the racing. Vehicles currently handle like they've got invisible stabilisers attached. You want to screech into a corner and let the back end snake wildly out, but all you get is a calm drift.

The game is still very much on the garage blocks and undergoing engineering works, so hopefully *Enthusia* will lose some of its sterility before release. It has the cars, the tracks and the will to match *Gran Turismo 4*, but without any AI competition to race against it's hard to say if *Enthusia* can live up to its bold name.



Bump and grind

The VGS currently uses arrows as indicators, but Akita says this could be changed to another system, one that sees a ball moving from the centre of a circle to represent the G-force. The fact this hasn't been finalised adds to the feeling that the VGS is a gimmick, albeit a well-meaning one. The meter can be turned off and this helps you to concentrate and, ironically, drive better. It's a pity this level of detail hasn't extended to the crashes. It's all too easy to gain an advantage by using barriers to shave seconds off times, though bumps are reported in your end-of-race stats.



On a (literal) bright note, the skies have cleared from the intentionally oppressive poisoned haze of the original

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **CAVIA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

Drag-On Dragoon 2

Cavia's pitch-black dark fantasy prepares for a second flight. Will it reach out to a larger audience this time?

Drag-On Dragoon (released here as *Drakengard*) was one of the first releases from a newlywed Square Enix, giving it a prominence it may never have attained in its earlier life as an Enix contract to a then-unknown developer. It's certainly hard to imagine Square ever lending its name to a title that so revelled in stripping away the gilded veneer of heroic fantasy to cake the player in waves of soot and blood.

Such was the excess of *Dragoon*'s overkill that the game was simply too fatiguing for some critics and players – and even its fans would admit that the hybrid of mass battle and aerial combat struggled to deliver on all it promised, if only because its themes and production design promised so much. Cavia's return to the title that trumpeted its arrival aims to make amends, though its subtitle – Love Red, Ambivalence Black – indicates it's unlikely to be by way of a happy ending. Set 18 years after the original conflict, that tale's protagonist Caim and his dragon Angelus have been forgotten after their disappearance. A new enemy threatens the world, and a new hero-and-dragon pair, Nowe and Legna, stand against it. With them is a returning figure from the first game, Manah – whose unwitting childhood role as harbinger of the apocalypse seems to have also been forgotten, or at least forgiven.

Unlike the first title, where Caim's companions could only be used for brief supporting roles in ground combat, *Dragoon 2* allows the player to switch at will between Nowe and Manah. Both characters can assemble their own unique suites of weaponry and, as in *Dragoon*, sufficiently blooding each weapon allows it to level-up. It's now possible to carry items into combat that have been purchased in towns during calmer periods – suggesting some more traditional RPG elements have made their way into the game's 'action-RPG' tag.

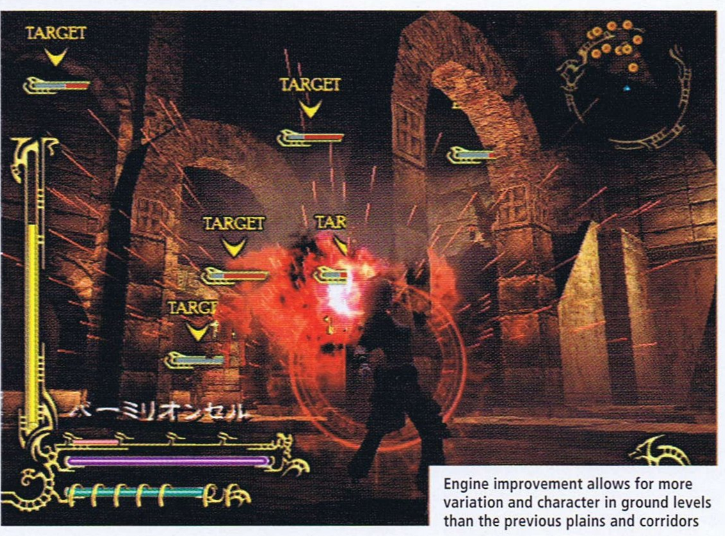
Dragonback combat will benefit from a new set of manoeuvres, including more air-to-ground attacks beyond the previous fireball-strafing: it's unclear whether these will be available from the outset, or will be awarded to Legna as he gains experience. Intricate aerial duels with other dragons are also promised, hopefully with a tightening of the original's airborne handling.

If Cavia can work to ensure *Dragoon 2*'s subtitle isn't a portent for the same divided audience reaction that afflicted its firstborn, it could be a brave new age for its heady mix of rewarding mechanics and alarming misanthropy. Then again, being a cult taste was always a part of *Dragoon*'s demented charm.



Both characters can use magic attacks – it's likely these are still bound to the currently equipped weapons rather than personal – but Manah's occult history makes her a more viable magic-user. A dab hand with a polearm, too





Engine improvement allows for more variation and character in ground levels than the previous plains and corridors





Bosses feature heavily, and standard encounters seem less numbers-heavy than before (with correspondingly improved model detail). The kill-chain counter remains, though, indicating there's still plenty of death to be dealt



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SNK PLAYMORE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (AU)**

The King Of Fighters '94 RE-BOUT

SNK's crown Neo-Geo jewels are given a polish – and a new controller – for their jubilee showing

To celebrate the venerable *King Of Fighters'* tenth anniversary – and seemingly in lieu of a *KOF 2004* – SNK Playmore has re-released the very first *KOF* title with a hi-res makeover. The imposing pixels of the Neo-Geo are gone, or at least relegated to a Classic mode, replaced by resampled versions with redesigned animations and effects. Backgrounds are now 3D, with weather and time-of-day effects to match, but their technical simplicity – lagging behind the visuals of the PS2's other full 3D fighters – puts them in the shade of the more characterful 2D originals.

It's now possible to create your team from any of the available characters, a luxury previously only allowed from *KOF '95* onwards, and the Japanese release will also support online play to unite nostalgic fighters from across the country. Also making a reappearance with added features is the Neo-Geo PS2 pad, this version featuring eight buttons – the extra four (two face, two shoulder) covering the PS2's shoulder buttons. The excellent D-pad is naturally well-suited to *KOF*'s demands, and will be put through its paces by further planned PS2 releases in 2005: multi-game collections of *KOF '95-'97*, *KOF '98-'00* and *Last Blade 1&2*, as well as standalone releases of *Mark Of The Wolves* and *Twinkle Star Sprites*.

Any SNK fans in the statistically unlikely position of being unable to play import releases may yet see PAL versions courtesy of Ignition and SNK Playmore's ongoing publishing relationship – although the online functionality and the Neo-Geo pad could be lost in translation.



The official joypad is much like those packaged with the Neo-Geo CD, albeit with the addition of shoulder buttons

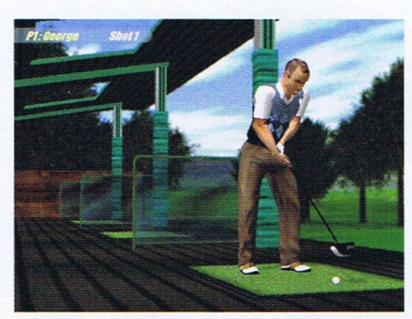


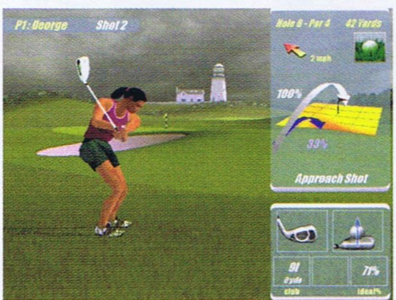
Though *Re-Bout*'s sprites have simply been scaled up and tidied rather than the daunting task of completely redrawing them, it's a step closer to the reality of a *KOF* built from the ground up to challenge *Guilty Gear*'s visuals

Gametrak: Real World Golf

What if instead of playing at playing golf you could just play it? Step forward, Aqua Pacific

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **IN2GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **AQUA PACIFIC**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2005, TBC (AU)**





There are five full 18-hole courses, each of which can be affected by different weather patterns. The game provides readouts on the angle at which you're holding your 'club', to help you pull off the perfect shot

Even if you've never played golf there are things you know. You know there's something about the knees, something about the wrists, something about the backside. *Real World Golf* takes all those instincts, clips them into the Gametrak's motion detector, and tees you off in a millimetre-perfect virtual world.

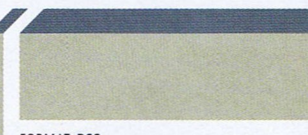
Using only movement, you navigate around the course, fly over holes (literally, arms held out Superman-style) and choose your clubs. Then you address the ball and swing. Even if you don't know how, you'll find that you know how.

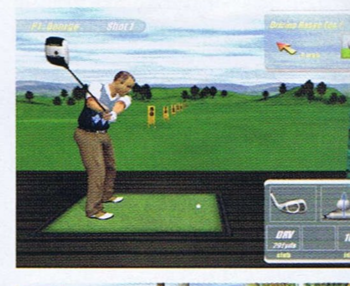
The attachment that clips on to the Gametrak's cables still hasn't been finalised, but don't expect either a serious replica club or a cute plastic cartoon. It seems likely to be a neat, black stake – just enough to give your hands (and your dignity) something to grip on to.

The other slight oddity is that you're standing square-on to the screen when your avatar is side-on to the ball. Your brain quickly adjusts, however, and the swooshing satisfaction of personally powering a 300-yard drive is a profound pleasure. There are five courses included, with the usual choices of championships, quick play and even some party games.

The motion detection has so far proved extremely sound, allowing a delicacy of touch which encourages experimentation with fades and draws. Putting proves a slightly more awkward process, as it so often does in golf games, and some more extended time with the game will be needed before it's clear if it's the kind of challenge that tips into frustration.

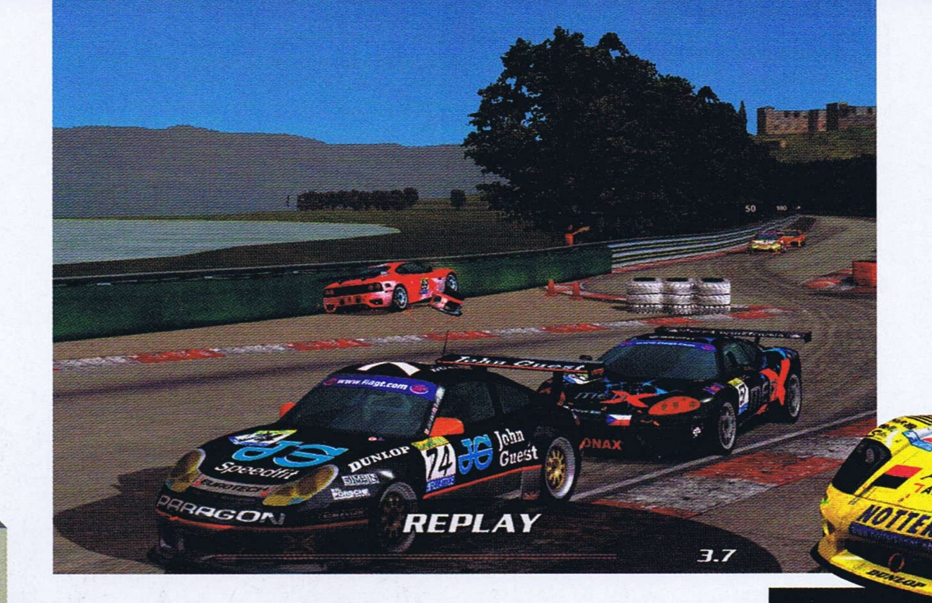
There's no question that *Real World Golf* feels a more elaborate evolution of Gametrak software than *Dark Wind*. It still suffers in comparison – both visually and in overall scope – to something like *Tiger Woods*, but that comparison could hardly be more irrelevant. *Tiger Woods* was rightly applauded for translating the smooth precision of a golf swing into an abstract flick of the analogue stick. *Real World Golf* preserves so much more of that fluidity it makes that compromise look like a rather quaint joke.







Commentary on your shots is provided throughout by – who else? – Peter Allis

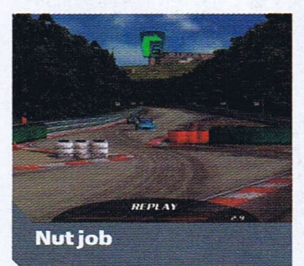


FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **SIMBIN**
ORIGIN: **GERMANY**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2005**



GTR

It's been hailed as the most realistic driving sim ever, but can SimBin deliver fun along with the authenticity?



Nut job

GTR is also the first racing game to take advantage of NaturalPoint's TrackIR technology. Previously used for flight sims, the device consists of a cap that changes the player's virtual viewpoint by tracking the movement of the head. Hopefully, this should give players a greater situational awareness and help with manoeuvres such as helping to define racing lines into corners. _GTR_ has already picked up several awards in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Scandinavia where it was released late last year. This international version also comes with 16 new vehicles, the ability to save mid-race and the epic 24 Hours of Spa race with a full day and night time cycle.

The founder of the team behind *GTR*, Henrik Roos, is a three-time Swedish GT champion and still competes in the FIA GT World Championship. His intimate knowledge of the sport instantly shows. But having a racing legend (at least in his own household) heading up the project is not the only quality that makes this simulation stand out. You see, Roos knows the importance of testing. Every minute nuance of a GT car's handling is going to be replicated in the game. And he's also employed a number of the top current GT drivers to test the game alongside his own crew.

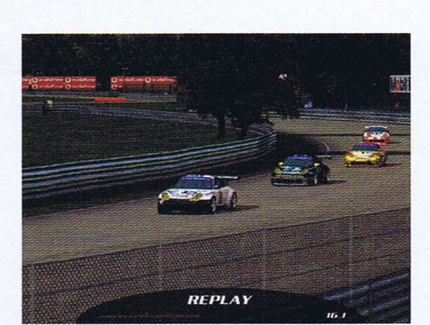
These claims of real-world physics and authentic handling are nothing new in the driving sim field, but it only takes a few moments in one of the vehicles to realise that *GTR* is a bit special. Modes go from Sunday driver though Arcade, Semi-Pro and up to Simulation. The harder the difficulty, the more driving aids you lose, but you'll also notice a sudden improvement in competitor AI. Even on Semi-Pro your rivals display a Schumacher-like determination, making overtaking an art rather than a reckless sport. Braking points must be observed or vital speed is lost and thinking a couple of corners ahead is necessary if you want to pass other cars successfully.

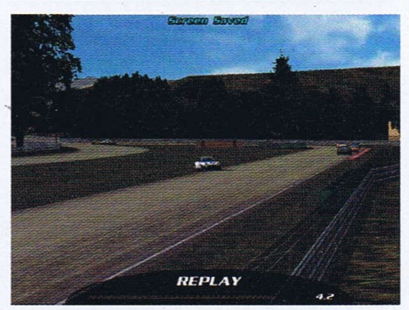
It's also encouraging to see AI drivers employing bullying tactics in an attempt to put you off your rhythm. Gentle nudging is commonplace, and cars darting up the inside when you control the corner can only be defended by those with a steady nerve. It's electrifying stuff because, at the highest setting, cheating and brutal behaviour is punished severely. Put one tyre on the grass and the traction you lose can be enough to spin you. Similarly, braking on gravel fails to exert any kind of bite. Just as it should be.

If this all sounds a bit too severe, then you'll be heartened to know that *GTR* never feels unfair. This is down to a superb level of consistency; once you learn the nuances of your particular vehicle, instinct takes over and it responds with a precision borne out of hundreds of hours of testing. But then there are always the driving aids for those who want to gradually work their way up to Championship standard.

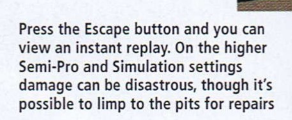
As *GTR* has the full FIA licence it includes all of the cars and drivers from the 2003 season as well as the prestigious 24 Hours of Spa race. It's also strong in the audio and visual departments and particular effort has gone into recording the authentic engine noises of anything from a Lotus Elise to a Ferrari 550. It might not have the nostalgia value of *Grand Prix Legends* but *GTR* has certainly got the potential to spawn a fan community just as rich.

The cars' interiors have also been modelled and kitted out with the appropriate dials and switches. Clearly a labour of love from people nuts about the sport, *GTR* still manages to be a lot of fun despite its insistence on real-world content





All race flags must be observed or severe penalties, including disqualification, will be administered. *GTR* also uses MOTEC, the race analysis software the real FIA teams use to improve their vehicles' performance



Press the Escape button and you can view an instant replay. On the higher Semi-Pro and Simulation settings damage can be disastrous, though it's possible to limp to the pits for repairs



Future perfect?



Screen Photography: **Tim Levy**



Looks aren't everything. But what happens when exceptional power meets truly exceptional beauty?

SONY

POWER

HOLD

RT

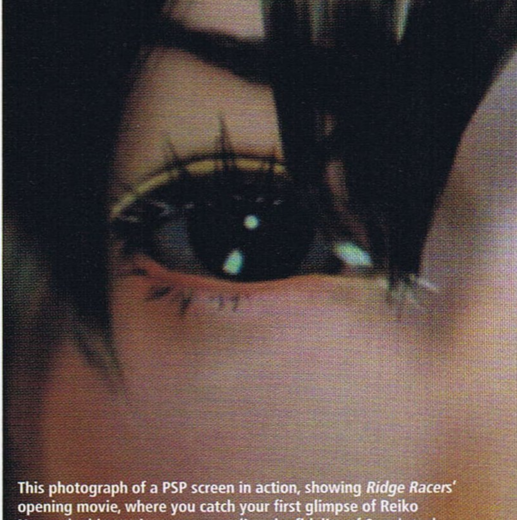
Think back to that moment, 14 months ago, when you first saw the PSP prototype. Forget for now your space-age swoon at all that gleaming blackness. Forget the hundreds of questions that crowded your mind, the breathless 'Is that really?'s and the 'But how does it?'s. Remember instead what was on the screen. Shimmering water, deepening from lucent turquoise to sooty blue. Fish, bright as flame. It may have been a mock-up, a cut'n'paste convenience, but it wasn't an accident. For its shocking, thrilling debut, Sony turned its PSP into a fish tank. Holding one now, it's still the clearest way to describe the astonishment of gazing down into that extraordinary screen. The colour and the clarity seem to go on for ever, pulling you down into new and unpredictable worlds. In a Bill Plympton cartoon it would swallow you whole, as you plunged an arm, a head, a whole person into that bottomless portal.

This isn't hyperbole, it's based on simple, measurable facts: 130,560 pinpricks phase through more than 16 million colours, forming a frame that matches your natural field of vision. Many gamers have never experienced their worlds in widescreen: none have ever done so mere inches from their eyes. The effect isn't what you might think. It's surprisingly relaxing, as your eyes and brain go off duty from having to disregard all the extraneous clutter which usually fills your peripheral vision. Sinking in to what you're being shown, whether game or film, becomes the path of least resistance. It's impossible not to think: 'This is how it was always meant to be'.

We're used to being shortchanged by the future. Some days it's hard not to resent the absence of hoverpods, food replicators and lunar tourism: the 21st century wasn't supposed to feature Sydney's CityRail, petrolium-based fuels or a mortal lifespan. Sony's PSP feels like the first device to deliver on those sci-fi promises. Surprisingly small, it barely feels big enough to contain the luxurious acreage of the screen. Vibrant LEDs wink amid transparent buttons and silver flanges. It is without question the most instantly desirable games console ever designed. It might well be the most instantly desirable piece of home electronics ever produced, a supposition which should keep **Edge**'s letters pages busy for months to come.

However, before we're accused of being the worst kind of graphics whores, consider what you will be seeing on that wondrous screen. Much of the PSP speculation has centred on tracking where the machine's graphical performance will slot into the established hierarchy. First it was going to be PSone quality, then better than PS2. Then PS1.5, then a little bit better than that. PS1.8? PS1.84? It is, in many respects, a pointless question. Viewing a game on a PSP is simply too radically different from sitting across the room from a TV for the comparison to have much practical meaning. For what it's worth, the best of what's been seen so far most closely resembles mid-generation PS2 titles, but the fruits of building games for a system with a standardised and high-quality display are only beginning to be reaped.

The games themselves are, as with any launch, a mixed bag. The previews on the following pages, as well as reviews of *Ridge Racers*, *Metal Gear Acid*, *Lumines* and *Vampire*



This photograph of a PSP screen in action, showing *Ridge Racers'* opening movie, where you catch your first glimpse of Reiko Nagase's shimmering eyes, revealing the fidelity of Sony's tech

Chronicle later in the magazine, give an indication of what strides have been taken to develop games which successfully exploit the PSP's unique nature, as well of where developers have fallen back on already tired formulas. What they all have in common, however, is the hardware through which you experience them, and that too, in some respects, is a mixed bag.

The PSP's audio capabilities are very strong, but neither the built-in speakers nor the supplied headphones can do them justice. It's not until you plug in a good set of 'phones (preferably in conjunction with *Lumines*) that you get a true sense of the audio quality. MP3 playback is good, if not quite of the standard of the very best portable players, and copying files across from a PC via a USB cable (not supplied) is quick and straightforward. The playback software is simple, but offers a good range of options: one small frustration is that it doesn't save your place in a track when you put the machine into sleep mode. A dedicated music button allows you to swap between pre-set equalizer settings.
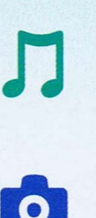
The traditional controls – D-pad, four face buttons, two shoulder buttons, start and select – work as well as they ever have. The concave D-pad has a smooth, gentle action which works well for controlling 3D games, but lacks some of the clicky precision which is often welcome in 2D gaming. More controversial is the analogue slider. Very different in feel from a tilting stick, the flat slider needs a very delicate touch to take full advantage of its range. Some will also find it positioned uncomfortably low on the device. Many developers confess that they have relied heavily on the D-pad in the early stages of their PSP projects, although they emphasise that most team members happily converted to the slider as they spent more time with the machine. Time will tell how skilled developers become at calibrating their games for its unique feel, but as things stand there's no question it gives functioning analogue control to PSP games.

Aside from the gaming buttons, the PSP's detailing feels ever so slightly cheap. The power slider, which flicks the game in and out of sleep mode, as well as fulfilling on, off and hold modes, feels loose and indistinct. A similar slider flicks out the UMD loader, which also feels slightly flimsy, although the discs themselves snap into place very satisfyingly. The shoulder buttons are also a little clacky and noisy enough (at least on new machines) to make you somewhat self-conscious in a quiet room. Considering the price point at which Sony has launched the device, these small complaints seem a little churlish, but it's hard not to wonder how magnificent the machine might have been if it could have been finished to the highest specifications.

Also set into the front of the device is a 'home' button, which will return you straight to the main menu from within whatever aspect of the device you are using. The menu system itself, the much-vaunted cross-media bar (or XMB), is a refined version of that introduced with the PSX. Presentation is stark and clean, and navigation is swift and sure – certainly a dramatic improvement on the comparitively dreadful PlayStation2 frontend.



Many were skeptical about the prototype PSP shots. However, Sony has ultimately delivered a gaming machine which is, if anything, even more impressive than those alluring first photos suggested







The PSP's ports are very neatly designed, making the rear of the machine as slinky as the front. Although tests have proven that the UMD slot can be used to launch disks halfway across the room, the usual action is much more controlled

Video playback, unquestionably one of the major selling points of the device, is still a problematic proposition. Sony is still maintaining that a strong line-up of retail movies will be available on UMD, but as yet there is little clear confirmation on how extensive this will be, or how it will be priced. It's possible to upload your own video files (via USB) to Memory Stick, but the process is a little more complicated than it sounds. The PSP uses basic MPEG4 encoding, but requires it to be presented in a proprietary wrapper. For those who already own, say, a Sony video camera, the process is simple, as footage will be automatically recorded in the Sony-friendly profile. For those using non Sony-friendly hardware, it will be necessary to convert files on a PC using Sony's Image Converter program. However, it's not yet clear how user-friendly a piece of software this will be, or how it will be distributed to PSP users. This leaves a question mark hanging over the PSP's potential as a massmarket personal movie player. It's a question mark which can be easily resolved with a convincing UMD movie release schedule, the provision of simple, accessible conversion software, and a drop in price of Memory Sticks, but until Sony can make concrete announcements on these factors, the reservations still stand.

There is, of course, another avenue through which Sony can provide video footage for your PSP: wireless download. The unit's wireless capabilities are an aspect of the machine that are only beginning to show their true potential. Split between ad-hoc and infrastructure modes, they allow nearby PSPs to connect to each other direct, and to the internet via wireless hotspots. Ad-hoc mode's obvious implications are for multiplayer gaming, and titles such as *Ridge Racers* demonstrate emphatically how well this can work, connecting eight players with straightforward ease. A less well-publicised aspect is the game share mode. Sony won't confirm how widespread this feature will be, but there is the possibility for games to beam multiplayer or demo versions of themselves to other PSPs which don't



have the software. The feature has already shown its worth on the DS, and it will be a valuable feature of the PSP if it's exploited to its full advantage.

Infrastructure wi-fi is another aspect of the PSP which hasn't yet been clearly articulated by Sony. Its potential is vast. True online gaming is an obvious and enormous attraction for many gamers. Downloadable content, which is being most dramatically pioneered by *Wipeout Pure*, means that new tracks, levels and characters – even language packs – can be added throughout the game's lifespan. Movie trailers for forthcoming games (as well as, presumably, forthcoming movies) could be made available. Ultimately, playable demos and even full OS updates could be downloaded direct to your PSP. To further complicate matters, many of these features could be accomplished either by downloading software direct to your PSP, or by downloading it to a PC and transferring it via USB. As yet, it's impossible for anyone – not even Sony – to accurately predict how pivotal a part of PSP ownership these possibilities will become: the territory is simply too uncharted. What is clear is that some aspects of the online shift will be the same as they are for any console – the tantalising prospect of online multiplayer and extra content balanced by the spectres of extra charges and patches for unfinished software.

Another unknown at this stage is how aggressively regional lockouts will be implemented on PSP software. The hardware is global: the PSP is the same wherever you are in the world. However, Sony has taken the decision to allow publishers to choose whether or not to implement region coding. The nearest parallel is Xbox, where publishers can choose whether or not to region protect a game. Overwhelmingly they do so, and in the few cases where games are region free it is sometimes simply because the developer didn't get around to implementing the protection before the game went to be pressed. If the PSP follows this pattern, then it will fly in the face of the mantra that has helped keep Nintendo on top of the handheld tree for so long. Despite a natural tendency towards draconian control measures, Nintendo has kept the GB family region free, understanding that this supports its function as a portable device. To be able to take your PSP anywhere in the world, but not play games from anywhere in the world, seems like a decision made in the interests of publishers rather than players.

Which brings us, at last, to the aspect of the PSP which dominated its pre-release hype: the battery. The short answer is that despite all the earlier anxieties, the PSP's battery is good enough. It's hard to predict exactly how much use you'll get from it, since different games draw such different amounts of power from the machine. Let *Ridge Racers* rip at full pelt – wi-fi multiplayer, speakers on full, screen at its brightest, and you'll easily drain the machine in under three hours. Relax with some MP3s, headphones on and screen off, and it will run for eight to ten. Most games will give you between four and six hours' play. Longer, of course, would be welcome, but battery life hasn't proved to be the Achilles heel it looked for so long that it might be.

So, after that instant physical attraction has worn off, is it still the most desirable videogame console ever conceived? That's a question that can only be answered with time. The machine's power means a slower development cycle than that of other handhelds, and its multimedia and wireless possibilities are extensive and complex. As a result, it will probably take all of 2005 to unveil the full potential of Sony's black beauty. If it conquers all the technical challenges it faces, it will be unstoppable. And, truth be told, even if it stumbles as a movie player and has an online service as patchy as the Dreamcast's, it will still be unstoppable.

Sony's PlayStation Portable has the looks, the brand and the price. To see it is to want it: a slice of the future lying gleaming in the palm of your hand. All you need to do is dive in.

It has the looks, the brand and the price. To see it is to want it: a slice of the future gleaming in the palm of your hand. All you need to do is dive in

Continued ›









UMDs prove very pleasing to handle, as is PSP game packaging in general. However, the square aperture on the rear through which the disk is read makes them feel slightly vulnerable, so don't be surprised to see protective wallets do a brisk trade



Q Entertainment

Ex-UGA producer Tetsuya Mizuguchi's Q Entertainment recently announced a partnership with Japanese giant Bandai for a new PSP and DS label, ((qb)), or Quest Beat. ((qb))'s manifesto is to expand the gaming market through a combination of the handhelds' unique qualities, new game experiences and collaborations with artists from genres outside of the videogame industry. We quizzed Mizuguchi on the brand, the PSP, and his debut title *Lumines*.

When you left Sega, was it your intention to focus only on the new handheld game machines?
Q Entertainment is not a handheld-only development company – it's just at the moment we happen to be working on a handheld platform. Ideally, we'd like to expand our current products into franchises – it could be on console, mobile phone, or PC. The possibilities are infinite.

You have spoken about making games that people can play without needing a manual. Do you feel gaming has become too complicated?
I don't think there is any problem with gaming at the moment being too difficult or complicated. The real issue is who is going to purchase and play on a platform like PSP. I imagine there are a lot of users who just want to play games with joy – they don't want to think about where or when to play. I want to reach those people.

Do you think many people who do not currently play games will buy a DS or a PSP?
Because a handheld console enables the user to play games anywhere and anytime, I think these new machines will bring a lot of old gamers back to gaming. Even the people who never played games before may start playing. But ((qb)) doesn't want to produce games especially for newcomers. We'd like all the users to feel new experiences, and recover the sense of fun with the new style of our games.

What is it about the PSP and the DS that appeals to you?
PSP has great visual and sound capabilities, and you can carry it around. It's more like an interactive Walkman than a games machine. The DS has the unique stylus touchscreen. So, for me, this is a new generation of an electronic toy. But I think the DS features very unique and interesting functions.

Is there anything about the PSP or DS that frustrates you? Are you disappointed by the DS's audio capabilities?
Well, if I start discussing the perfect machine, there will be no limit, so let's not get going on that discussion! It's true the DS's sound capability could be better, but it balances very well with the rest of the functions.

What has been your favourite experience with developing on the PSP?
It took a long time before Sony announced the detailed specs for the PSP, so the majority of designing and development has to be done in our imagination. That was fun. Everyone in the team had very different images about how the hardware would look.

Who are the creators you would most like to work with? And do you think that it's still hard to get some artists/musicians/animators to take videogames seriously?
I think the creative winter has ended, or will do very soon. But, for the moment, I cannot reveal who I will be working with...

Sony's Australian launch line-up

Little has been confirmed about the PSP's launch at this stage, not price, date or thirdparty line-up. What is known is SCEA's firstparty launch roster; our early hands-on impressions follow over the next five pages...

Wipeout Pure

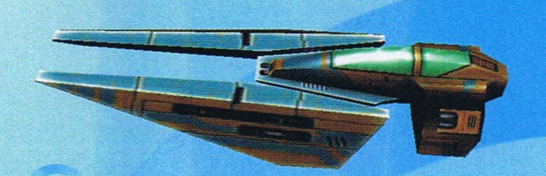






The jewel in the local launch line-up is also the game nearest completion. The presentation is as startlingly beautiful as you would expect, defining the PSP's future-cool status as surely as the original did for the PlayStation. Stripped back from the later games' excesses, *Pure* promises simpler, starker racing and then sprinkles that promise with a hundred tempting cherries: wireless multiplayer, downloadable tracks, ships, tunes and skins. A brief hands-on wasn't enough to form a solid opinion on the all-important handling, but there's every reason to be hopeful for an exceptional version of a classic series.





Sony Liverpool

Wipeout's home has always been in Liverpool UK, and a few surviving members of the original line-up make up part of *Pure*'s 26-strong creative team. We spoke with **Tony Buckley** (producer), **Colin Berry** (game designer) and **John Machin** (graphic artist) about their new take on an old vision of the future.

Does the name *Pure* mean you're taking the game back to its original, pared-down styling?
Obviously some of the iterations since the original didn't really go the way some fans might have liked – I'm not saying they weren't good games, but we wanted to go back to some of the things that people liked from all of the games we produced. We took the Zone mode from *Fusion*, we've gone back to less weapons like the earlier games, and we've tried to get the handling back to *2097* – which we thought was head and shoulders above the rest.

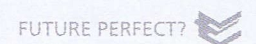
Handling and control are crucial – how do you feel about the D-pad and analogue slider?
The D-pad's great. The slider I think is going to take people a little time to get used to – no one can lie about that, because it's totally... I've tried to describe it to friends outside the industry who are used to N64 or DualShock sticks, and you can't really describe it. Once they get used to it, I think it'll become a useful part of the machine, but at first I think people will be a little shocked by it. Everyone thought it was a speaker! A lot of people are playing it with the D-pad at the moment, but I think it's like when the analogue controllers first came out on the PlayStation – no one really picked up on using it until they realised it had its advantages.

What was your reaction when you finally saw the finished PSP?
When we saw it running at E3 this year, we all said the same thing: the machine looks smaller than we thought and the screen is absolutely... fucking huge [laughs]. And when we finally got the dev kits in August, everybody in the studio said exactly the same thing. The screen is huge.

You picked up really strongly on the PSP's wireless connectivity. How early on did you decide to commit to that?
From when we saw the specs, really. As soon as we heard it was WiFi that gave us a hell of a lot of options, and then there was the Memory Stick, so we were thinking of ways in which the game would always be *Wipeout*, but could also have things added to it to justify bringing it out on a new console. That's where the downloadable content and extra design elements that gave to us came from.

Are you worried about how new PSP owners will cope with the wealth of downloadables?
Not really – I mean, people use iPods now. It's something which is available that wasn't previously available outside of PCs, especially not on a handheld console, and I can't see them not wanting it.

The *Wipeout* series has a tradition of collaborating with outside designers. Do you have anyone lined up to provide downloadable content for the game?
We've created the levels with a lot of billboards, which opens a lot of opportunities – what people want to do with those levels, how they'll link to downloadable levels I'm not quite sure yet. But because those billboards are there, *Pure* could even become like an art gallery within a game. What we're hoping for is a lot of player input.





Kuju Entertainment

Kuju has four studios across the UK, and is currently at work on the GameCube version of *Advance Wars*. We spoke to their PSP team about their upcoming flight game, *Interceptor*.

What's the genesis of *Interceptor*?
Interceptor started life as a technology demo we were working on to investigate the capabilities of the PSP. Once we had it running on the PSP hardware, we realised how much fun it was to play, how easily the hardware could handle drawing detailed terrain and the possibilities wi-fi support opened up. This means that certain 'sim' aspects have been dropped in favour of a more exhilarating fast-paced arcade game.

Flight games – even arcade-style examples – aren't especially popular on home consoles. What made you want to develop one for the PSP?
It may have started as a technology project but *Interceptor* has evolved into an original and appealing game concept. We do think there is a market for this type of game, in our minds Nintendo's *PilotWings* comes under the flight game banner and is not seen as a geeky flight sim. The target demographic for the PSP is much older than that of other handheld platforms. This allows us more flexibility in the type of games we are creating in terms of content and gameplay. We see the PSP appealing to a more open-minded audience who will embrace new gameplay mechanics and genres. The PSP also allows us to create new IP for the future – something that is near impossible on the more established consoles.

How big a difference did the screen dimensions make to your game design? And how have you found working with the PSP's controls?
The PSP screen is a revelation especially when it comes to doing a flight game. A larger field of view is particularly useful when it comes to dog-fighting, and the additional screen space ensures that heads-up displays do not clutter the main view.

The lack of a second analogue stick can be problematic for flight games, but after a lot of thought we are confident that we can provide an intuitive and exciting flying experience. The PSP analogue stick takes some getting used to but does provide as much sensitivity as a DualShock controller.

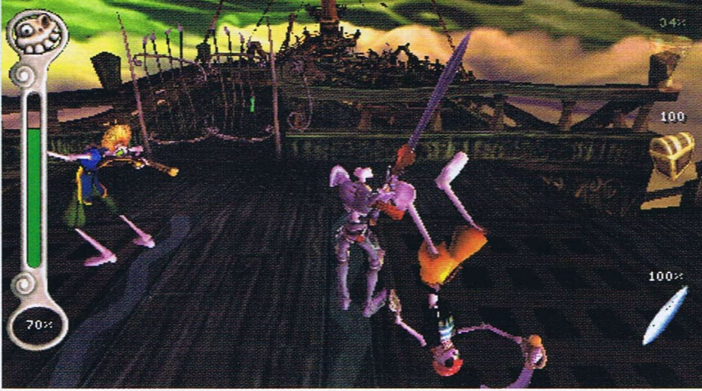
The last year has seen a real shift in the quality of PS2 games as developers have been able to use their experience of the hardware to exploit its full potential. Do you feel the PSP has similar scope for growth, or is its technology already fairly optimised and understood?
The PSP has massive potential, especially with inbuilt wi-fi support and with crossover products for its other entertainment abilities (movies and music). In terms of the learning curve I would imagine the first wave of titles to rival second-generation PS2 titles. As developers get more familiar with the hardware and use their experience gained from the PS2 I would expect the second generation of PSP titles to rival the games we are currently seeing on the PS2. In order for this to happen in practice the development budgets will have to come through and this will rely on the publisher's perceived success of the platform. As a developer it's a great machine to develop for – even now we can see the potential it has for years to come.

MediEvil



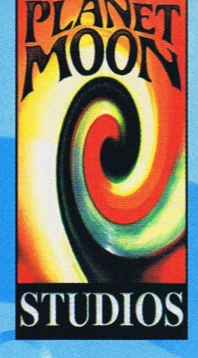








There's a complicated stat attached to this game – *MediEvil* is the most popular PSone franchise which hasn't been updated in the 128bit generation. The PSP version is an entirely new game, but many aspects of it will be familiar to those who loved the original. It's a lavish production, with spacious levels, an orchestral score and the voice of Tom Baker dryly narrating your journey. From the code we've played, there remain some questions about the control system: the deliberately flamboyant, marionette-style animation, combined with our unfamiliarity with the analogue slider, left the game feeling loose and awkward. Hopefully the finished version will feel very different.





Planet Moon Studios

Reliably eccentric Californian residents Planet Moon (of *MDK*, *Giants* and *Armed & Dangerous* infamy) surprised industry observers earlier in the year by announcing their committal to the PSP for future projects. We spoke to producer **Aaron Loeb**, currently waist-deep in development of their yet-to-be-unveiled project *Infected*.

When you made the decision to go PSP exclusive, did you have any inkling of the low pricepoint Sony was going to announce? And what was your reaction when you heard the news?
We had an inkling that it would be priced for the masses. That hunch was bolstered when we attended E3 2004 and Tokyo Game Show. Financial analysts, retailers, publishers, and developers all said it would be a mistake to release the system at $300, the price a lot of people were assuming. Sony has not proven itself prone to colossal blunders in the game space. Our hunch was that they would move heaven and earth to get the system out at $250 or less. But our reaction will reveal how certain we were of that hunch – we jumped up and down, kissed complete strangers, cracked open a few pints and breathed several sighs of relief.

Are you surprised more independent developers haven't committed to the format in the way you have?
No. It seemed very risky when we first announced our strategy. But now that it's out in Japan and looks as unbelievable as it does, is as powerful as it is and is priced like it is, I would be very surprised if more don't join the bandwagon. Part of us hopes that others don't realize how amazing the system is, though; we want it all for ourselves.

Other than the obvious implications of wi-fi, how has the handheld nature of the machine changed the way you design games?
There are many other considerations ranging from technology to design. This generation of handhelds (PSP and DS) provide the first 3D platforms where you know the exact resolution and aspect ratio at which the game will be viewed. This has a big impact on asset creation and tweaking; if it looks fantastic on your PSP screen, it will look fantastic on the player's as well. You no longer have to worry about scaling assets so that they work at lower resolutions (as on PC) or so that they don't look muddy at higher resolutions (as on consoles using HDTV). Add to that the gorgeous screen on the PSP, and you have a recipe for very polished graphics.

Do you think PSP game quality will evolve in the way PS2 games did, or is it already a mostly optimised device?
This is a first-of-its-kind device. Not only will there be room for technological growth as we've seen with previous generations of consoles, but we can expect an exciting growth on the platform in design. Right now, everyone's only guessing how gamers will use a handheld, widescreen, wi-fi 3D platform. Once we start seeing how the consumer is playing real games on real systems, we can expect incredible and unprecedented game ideas to blossom. As examples, no one knew the Xbox was going to spawn *Halo* parties. No one knew the EyeToy would be the party device it's become in Europe. When people really start using the PSP, the games are sure to evolve.

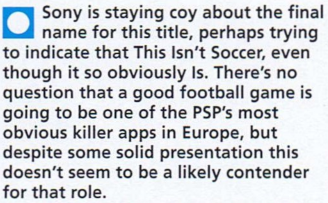
Ape Academy

It's impossible to avoid the handy '*Ape Escape* meets *Wario Ware*' explanation of this game, but that doesn't quite do it justice. The minigames are as bizarre as you would expect, and the best have more staying power than Wario's micro diversions. Developed by the team behind *Xi* (*Devil Dice*), the most notable inventiveness comes in games that require two players to compete on the same PSP, one at each end. It makes for one of the most intense, if preposterous, gaming experiences of recent times. All that's obviously missing from *Ape Academy* is the elegant and charming presentation which made *Ape Escape* so irresistible.









Football



Sony is staying coy about the final name for this title, perhaps trying to indicate that This Isn't Soccer, even though it so obviously Is. There's no question that a good football game is going to be one of the PSP's most obvious killer apps in Europe, but despite some solid presentation this doesn't seem to be a likely contender for that role.

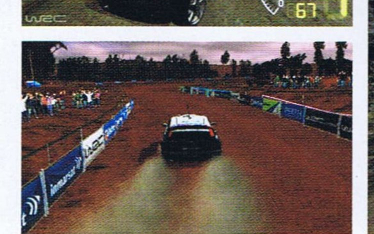
The title's early release, combined with full wi-fi support (including the ability to alert any other PSPs in your vicinity that you're up for a game) may make it a more popular purchase than its slightly lacklustre gameplay would seem to deserve.





WRC







At an earlier stage of development than some of the other titles available to play right now, *WRC* is one of the games which makes best use of the PSP's enormous screen. Rally games have always had a powerful sense of atmosphere, and *WRC*'s recreation of the wilds is already impressive. Work remains to be done on the handling – the developer, Traveller's Tales, admits that many on the team are still playing from the D-pad (although it must be stressed that the game handles well with that control method), but there's every indication that the PSP version of the game will be as well presented and fully featured as its PS2 cousin.

Formula One

Talking to developers makes one thing clear: Sony has been banging the 'opportunistic play' drum very hard at anyone working on PSP. It's got to be pick-up-and-play-and-put-down-again, which is not an easy play style to integrate with an F1 game. The result is a much more arcadey experience, where you won't have to worry about collision damage, tweaking downforce settings or completing 72 laps. The developer has done a good job in achieving its aim of simplifying the handling, but the result robs F1 of some of its distinctive feel. If you want to play an arcade racer and you're not an F1 nut, why choose this when there's *Ridge Racers*?







Namco

It seemed as if *Ridge Racers* progressed from a promising, if empty TGS prototype to the PSP's most solid and impressive Japanese launch title overnight – and in truth, the game's development period was only slightly more relaxed. Associate producer Hideo Teramoto spoke to us about the race to launch day.

It seems to be traditional for PlayStation consoles to launch with a *Ridge* game: were you under pressure to deliver a special title to live up to this tradition?
Yes, we definitely felt the pressure! This is because as well as being a traditional PlayStation launch title, the *Ridge Racer* series has always been among the first titles to fully showcase the performance and features of new PlayStation hardware.

Our goals with *Ridge Racers* were to launch with the hardware, utilise the capabilities of the PSP as much as possible and present new and fun gameplay for the players. Achieving these goals on time was very challenging, but at the same time the team greatly enjoyed these challenges.

What difficulties did you encounter producing a game with so much content and quality in such a short development period?
We were very surprised by the capabilities of the PSP. There is so much more we would like to have done to push its features even more, but we had to complete the title in a very short time in order to launch with the Japanese hardware. Usually trade-offs are made when developing a high-quality title within such a tight schedule, and it wasn't an easy challenge for us.

Were there any specific difficulties in implementing the eightplayer multiplayer – far more than previous *Ridge* titles?
Everything was hard! It was a launch title, so the development tools for PSP were incomplete, and kept evolving as we were creating the game. Our programmers said different things every day, such as: 'Maybe we can have only two players', or 'Perhaps we can get six players connected', or 'Sorry, we can't have more than four players working'. Then eventually they made it possible for up to eight players to connect at once. They did everything they could think of to accomplish this, and really deserve a round of applause!

How do you think your team was able to draw so much out of the machine so early? And how much potential for improvement do you think there is for later PSP games?
As with any new hardware, there really is no shortcut for getting the most out of the PSP. The final quality of the game is just a result of continued effort and research. The *Ridge* team really put everything they had into this game, and I am extremely proud of the team for being able to create a game of such quality.

I believe that similar to the five-year evolution of PS2 games, PSP games will also noticeably improve from everyone's first efforts.

We were able to create beautiful graphics running at 60 frames per second. However, at the same time we intentionally reduced the CPU clock speed in order to conserve battery power. This was one of the most difficult technical challenges for us. Future titles may use the maximum clock speed of 333MHz, but sacrifice battery life to do so.

Fired Up



The name has changed, but *Fired Up* wears its *Hardware* heritage very clearly on its sleeve. Although the singleplayer mode has been bolstered, the emphasis remains on vehicle-mayhem multiplayer. This works very smoothly over wireless, and the game's solid physics means that the rough and tumble of pitching tanks against 4x4s is very satisfying.

Overall handling isn't spectacular, however, and despite some innovative weapons there isn't much of a spark to the deathmatches. There is still work to be done on the code we played, but as things stand, *Fired Up* feels slightly lifeless and old-fashioned.



Everybody's Golf

It was great on the PSone. It was good on the PS2. It's going to be just as satisfying on the PSP, but it's frankly disconcerting to be faced with such an archaic play mechanic on such a futuristic device. Stopping sliders on bars may be a proven control scheme, but it feels anachronistic in the analogue age. Aside from familiarity, *Everybody's Golf* offers its usual balance of achingly cute presentation and complex and precise golf play. Wireless multiplayer works smoothly, but can be a little uninvolving since you track opponents' progress purely with stats, so face a frustrating wait for the poorest player to finish a hole.









Ready At Dawn

Though Californian PSP developer Ready At Dawn is a new studio, it's one drawing on proven talent from Blizzard, Capcom Digital, Naughty Dog and the comics industry for its current – still under wraps – action-adventure title. We spoke to co-founder **Didier Malenfant,** whose programming history stretches from the Amiga demo scene chip-frying to tool design for *Jak & Daxters 1* and *2*.

Had you already decided to develop for the PSP when you founded Ready At Dawn?
Yes, I had made my decision to leave Naughty Dog a little bit before the E3 where the PSP was announced. When I heard the specs, knowing Sony's technical and marketing skills, it was a given that it was the platform we wanted to work on. It seemed like a gamble to some at the time, but to us it was the platform that had us the most excited and we went at it head first.

You've all come from traditional home console or computer backgrounds: how has the adjustment to developing for a handheld been? Has the PSP's power eased the transition?
The main differences have to do with the game design itself, rather than the technical side. From the get-go we approached the PSP just like a PS2 in terms of the technical scope of our game. Many developers targeted really low on the power curve for their PSP projects whereas we used a somewhat kamikaze approach and aimed for the moon. For the PC guys, I think it was quite a relief to finally work on a stable platform and spend our time trying to make the most of it rather than shoot for a moving target.

One of the most impressive features of *Jak & Daxter's* engine, and those of later PS2 titles, has been the use of streaming for seamless worlds: have Sony's limitations on UMD access hamstrung this school of design on the PSP?
I don't know where those rumours of battery life problems and Sony limiting developers' access to the UMD come from, we've never heard of such a thing. I think it comes down to common sense; everything on a handheld consumes power. It's nothing new, really, and just like graphics or memory useage you always end up juggling a bit to make sure you make the most of what is available to you. As people get better at this, I'm sure some games will use the same kind of streaming system as the one we developed at Naughty Dog. We're definitely looking into it already ourselves.

After working with a development kit for most of the year, what was your reaction when you got your hands on a Japanese production unit?
I was still blown away. I can't think of anybody who won't be awed when they pick one of these up. To see fullblown 3D games like *Ridge Racers*, *Armored Core* or our game running on a handheld is a mind-blowing experience. It gets some people, including me, thinking about not owning a home console… it's that good.

Upcoming PSP games

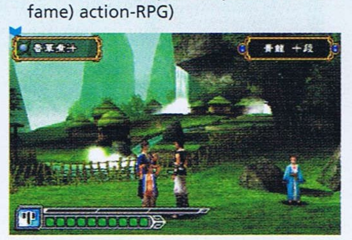
- Archer Maclean's Mercury
- New Ape Escape game
- Bleach (SCEJ fighter)



- New Burnout game
- Coded Arms (Konami FPS)
- Death, Jr.
- Free Running (Eidos)
- Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core
- New Grand Theft Auto game
- Harvest Moon
- New Level 5 (Dark Cloud creator) RPG
- Makai Wars (Nippon Ichi)
- Need For Speed Underground Rivals
- New Princess Crown game (Atlus)
- New Persona game (Atlus)
- New Sega title
- New ((qb)) title
- Shinobidu Imashime (Acquire ninja title)
- Shutokou Battle: Zone Of Control
- Sengoku Cannon (new Psikyo shooter)
- New Stormfront title
- New Tecmo title
- Tales Of Melfes (Namco RPG)
- Tony Hawk's Underground 2 Remix
- Twisted Metal: Head-On



- New Tenchu game
- Tenchi No Mon (Climax (of Landstalker fame) action-RPG)



- Untold Legends: Brotherhood Of The Blade (SOE wi-fi dungeon crawler)



Phil Harrison

The executive vice president of development talks about the PSP's multimedia potential, its relationship to other games machines and the challenge of bringing such a desirable device to market



How important do you expect the potential to be for USB link-up between PS2 and PSP?
There are many interesting game design features that can be introduced by connecting a PSP and a PS2. We're already seeing titles use this feature like *Armored Core Formula Front* in Japan and I expect many other titles to use this feature, too.

Are there plans for more ambitious uses for it, such as transferring music from a PS2 game to the PSP music player, for example, or even playable games?
The possibilities should be endless – as developers get beyond the launch of PSP and are into a more longterm design and development phase, I believe we'll see some really innovative uses of the interoperability and connectivity of PSP and PS2.

Do you see it as a way to encourage consumers to buy both PSP and PS2 copies of the same game or series?
That may be a side benefit, but it's really a great way of extending the gameplay experience from a game on PS2 in the home to PSP anywhere. PSP and PS2 games – and their characters – can become constant companions in your life, if you wish.

What about the Image Converter software needed to upload your own movie files to the PSP?
The Image Converter software creates the PSP profile wrapper around the MPEG4 stream. This matches the content for the PSP screen dimensions, for example. The software can be downloaded and we're exploring other ways of bringing it to the user, both as a standalone piece of software and by building the converters into other software products and online services.

What systems does the software have to prevent piracy?
Digital Rights Management is an integral part of the PSP design, with many security features built into both UMD, Magic Gate and the CPU. How this is actually used obviously remains confidential but there will be many audio and video contents that can be freely distributed with or without DRM. The whole point of a DRM system is that it enables the content owner to decide how their copyrighted material is made available to the end user and if it can be freely distributed to other users or not.

Memory Stick Duo remains more expensive than other memory formats such as SD and MMC cards. Do you see that as a permanent pattern, or do you expect Memory Stick pricing to catch up?
Memory Stick Duo delivers high memory capacity, low cost, a small form-factor and is widely adopted in hundreds of consumer electronics and mobile communications products from dozens of manufacturers. The global pricing for Memory Stick has fallen sharply over recent years – as demand for higher memory capacity increases, the cost comes down. We expect this trend to broadly continue as more suppliers enter the Memory Stick market.

How do you expect people to watch the bulk of the video they watch on their PSP – from downloaded content, self-produced content or retail UMD?
That's the beauty of PSP. You decide. This empowers the user to enjoy whatever content they want, wherever they want. Downloaded or converted TV content on to Memory Stick is a great way to catch up on last night's favourite TV shows on the way to work.

> "Downloaded or converted TV content on Memory Stick is a great way to catch up on last night's favourite TV shows on the way to work"

Has Sony considered an 'iTunes'-style music and movie download service to dovetail with the PSP's capabilities?
Yes, absolutely – in fact we've already made announcements in the US about partnerships with the Sony Connect service.

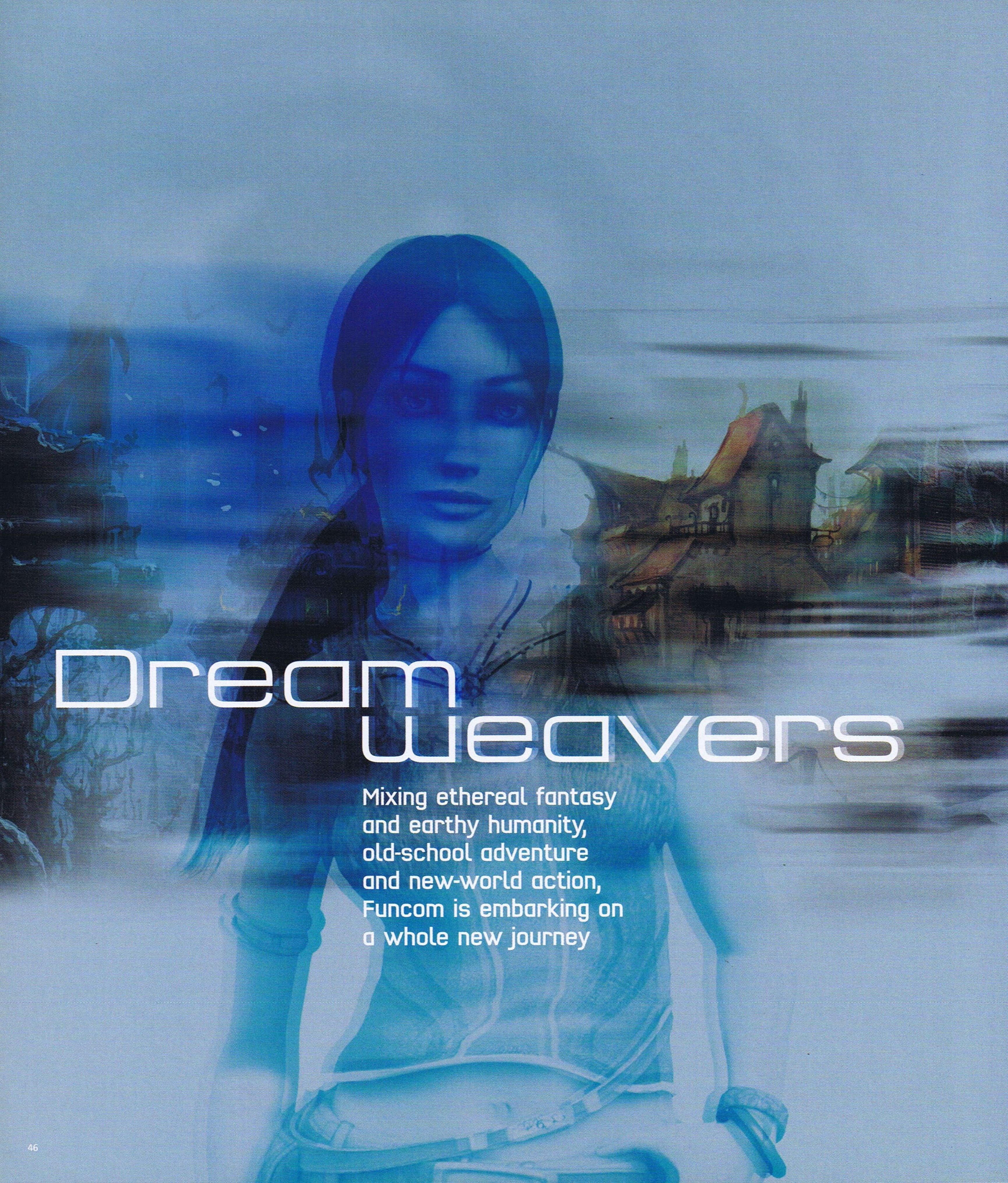
Although a lot of media attention has focused on the 'DS versus PSP showdown', is it not fairer to say that your nearest competitor is really yourself, allowing for your PlayStation2 and portable audio and video products?
As I've said before, I believe we will enjoy 100 per cent of the PSP market. In the way that PlayStation revolutionised the TV-based gaming market, we want PSP to dramatically change the landscape for portable, mobile entertainment – whether it's games, music, movies or new forms of entertainment that merge all three. PSP and PS2 are not direct competitors but can comfortably coexist in the user's entertainment choices. PS2 is limited to the home, PSP is not.

DVD playback was very significant in helping to boost early sales of the PlayStation2. Was video playback seen as a similar way to boost early PSP uptake?
I think that the amazing response to PSP in Japan shows this is more than 'just' a portable games machine but an entertainment technology that enables users to control how, what and where they play, watch or listen.

After the stock shortages of the Japanese launch, have the European and US release dates been put back to allow more preparation time?
As of right now, we've not announced the launch date for the US or Europe – although it may have been by the time this is printed – so it's a bit difficult to answer that question!

Do you expect to have stock shortages for the European launch?
We don't plan to have stock shortages as part of a strategy, but unfortunately it's a fairly likely scenario given the amazing reaction we've had to the machine and the software.

As things stand, Nintendo's DS has an installed base of approaching three million, six times that of the PSP. Is that how you expected the situation to be at this stage?
Given that PSP has only been on the market for 25 days [at time of going to press] and that we've shipped every unit we've made we're extremely happy with progress so far. Every effort is being made to increase supply and try to match the enormous demand.



Dream Weavers

Mixing ethereal fantasy and earthy humanity, old-school adventure and new-world action, Funcom is embarking on a whole new journey



"And this," says (*Dreamfall*'s game director) **Ragnar Tørnquist**, proudly, "is our ex-boyfriend's apartment." It takes a moment for the giggles to spread around the room, but when they do they infect Tørnquist as surely as everyone else. "Well, not OUR ex-boyfriend," he clarifies, ruefully. "I get a little too attached sometimes. Anyway. This is your ex-boyfriend's apartment." More giggles. We deny having ever even met the man, let alone embarked on a doomed affair. "Fine. This is ZOË's ex-boyfriend's apartment." He raises an eyebrow, and the laughter subsides.

This isn't an exercise in poking fun at a roomful of Norwegians having to do a presentation in their second language – not least because everyone's English here is shockingly flawless. Instead, it's the perfect illustration of something which is at the heart of the game they're making: the question of identity. *Dreamfall* is the sequel to *The Longest Journey* (PC, 1999), a lavish but traditional adventure which famously introduced us to April Ryan, a character with more capricious humanity than games had mustered before or since.

Dreamfall, however, isn't a lazy follow-up; there are stark contrasts between the two games. *TLJ* was a deeply conventional point 'n' click adventure, criticised as passionately for its obscure puzzles and extended conversation trees as it was praised for its sumptuous art direction and intelligent, articulate cast. *Dreamfall* is a thirdperson action adventure, carefully tailored for the Xbox pad as well as the PC mouse. It has fighting in it. It means that *Dreamfall* has to pitch itself very carefully. Why should loyal *TLJ* fans want to play something so radically different? And, more importantly, since there are so many more of them, why should the people who were alienated by *TLJ*'s puzzles want to play *Dreamfall*?

At the mention of *TLJ*'s puzzles, the team pull faces. There's a rumble of muttering in which the only distinct phrase is "that damn rubber duck" – a reference to the famously obtuse moment which saw you inflating a punctured rubber ring to apply variable pressure to the handles of a clamp which you'd rescued from a complicated plumbing contraption in order to salvage a key which had conveniently fallen on to some electrified subway tracks. "Puzzle," says Tørnquist carefully, "is a word I don't necessarily enjoy that much. Puzzles to me imply something which is, well, *puzzling*. Our philosophy is very simple. It has to feel relevant and realistic – it should never feel like an

TITLE: **DREAMFALL: THE LONGEST JOURNEY**
FORMAT: **PC, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **FUNCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **NORWAY**
RELEASE DATE: **SPRING 2005**





arbitrary challenge just to stop your progress through the game. But *challenges*" – he stresses the word sternly – "are important to make you feel empowered – it's a key element in the game."

There's no denying the loyalty that traditional adventure game fans feel for their genre. The question that faced the *Dreamfall* team was if the group of people who'd enjoyed the puzzles in *TLJ* was big enough to sustain full-scale game development. For Tørnquist the answer is simple: "No, it's not, and that's the challenge for us doing *Dreamfall*. We're not going to make games that nobody wants to play. We're not in this for the sake of art, we're in it because it's a craft we enjoy and because we like to entertain people."

"We're like every other company – we have to make money," Tørnquist continues. "We want to appeal to a lot of people, and puzzles don't let you do that. There's only a narrow section of people left who still enjoy *Myst*. I've *never* enjoyed that. I'm not smart enough to get past strange sliding-type things. So we want to simplify without stupidifying. *Dreamfall* won't be as difficult as *TLJ*, but I don't see that as a bad thing. I don't think most people finish the games they buy. They get maybe halfway through and then they give up – it's true for a lot of us around this table. We don't see the point in creating a game where people get stuck halfway through. We're not making a game where the hi-score is important, we're making a game where the journey is important."

Does that mean he's abandoned the game's core audience in the interests of courting the wider market? Tørnquist considers: "I don't think people played *TLJ* because of the gameplay. Some people liked it in spite of the gameplay and some people liked the whole package – but no one liked it just for the mechanics. So this time around we're not taking away what people loved about the game, but we're going to add what other games offer nowadays – the pacing, the freedom."

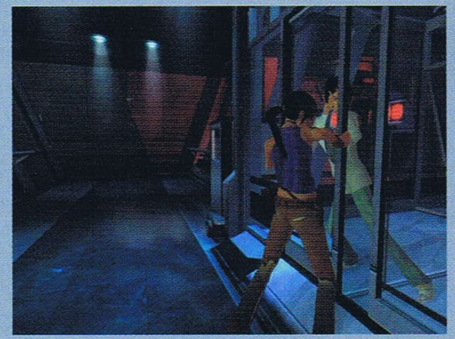
He appears unrepentant about the decision: "We always like to do something we haven't done before. And we've done the adventure game, and we don't want to go back to that again. There were some people on the team who thought, 'Oh my god, should we do this, are we going to screw it up, are we going to ruin the feel of it?', but once we really described what we were going to do in detail they felt a lot better. This a true action adventure. Most action adventures are really platform games or action games. This game is a story, and that story is a thriller and so it needs action. If you're going to tell a story that has higher stakes, it's going to have consequences that lead to more dangerous situations and that means you're going to need a system which has direct control. You can do that without including combat, but that doesn't feel right either. Why shouldn't you be able to defend yourself?"



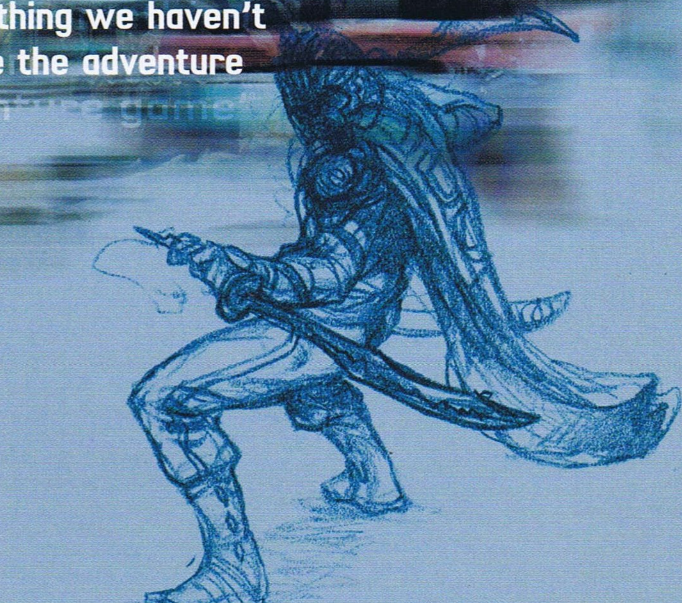
Players of *The Longest Journey* will recognise a number of locations for April's earlier adventures. Some have changed dramatically; others, less so

"We always like to do something we haven't done before. And we've done the adventure game"

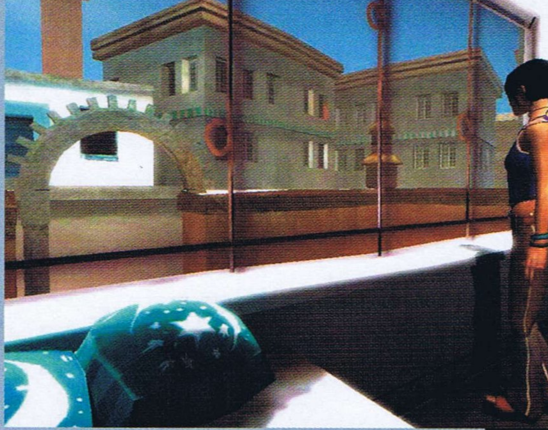
This argument makes *Dreamfall* snap into focus. This isn't an adventure game mindlessly updated to mirror current gaming convention. This is a team with a specific story to tell, determined to wrangle the best of gaming's techniques into telling it in the best way they can imagine. Once you've accepted that this is a thriller, a story punctuated with danger, violence and desperate improvisation, it becomes obvious why the format has changed. And at that point, the interesting thing about *Dreamfall* shifts from being the 'Can adventure games survive?' chestnut to 'Just what is this story they're trying to tell?'



Set-pieces, like this rescue sequence, can't be failed. Although the game works hard to induce a sense of desperate panic, it allows you time to look around and plan your actions. In combat, death will reset your game to a recent checkpoint




Ragnar Tørnquist


Despite her fantasy environment, Zoë is facing a fairly mundane conundrum, having recently split from her boyfriend and moved back to live with her father. It's not average videogame backstory

First impressions are the very opposite of thrilling. The game opens (after a top-secret prelude set in what Tørnquist calls "a very mysterious place") in the sunny tranquillity of New Casablanca, 200 years in the future. This isn't strictly speaking our world – like *TLJ*, *Dreamfall* starts out on Stark, a recognisable but distinctive alternate Earth – but it feels like how you wish our world was. In the 23rd century, Africa has emerged as a new world power. It has become a technology producer, and is wealthy compared to a Europe that has shaken itself to pieces. Tørnquist clearly relishes the chance to engage in a little sociopolitical engineering. "It's nice to do a bit of empowerment in a game," he grins. Zoë, one of the game's three central characters, wakes up in her palatial bedroom – all stone floors, luxurious cushions and endless sunshine. As is Tørnquist tradition she's young, beautiful and a little dispossessed. As is also Tørnquist tradition, she's ("very tastefully," he stresses) wearing only her underwear.

Once dressed, and with her character neatly established by the unpacked boxes of her possessions stacked in the corner, it's already clear that Zoë is a character as irresistibly human as April ever was. She dashes out into the piercing sunlight like a girl late for gym class, not like a videogame hero late for a cut-scene. The trigger which converts this idyll into a tense thriller is a seemingly innocuous favour – picking up a package for that troublesome ex-boyfriend. This takes Zoë to JIVA, a biotechnology company, and her encounter with a nervy, rude receptionist begins to map out how a 'true' action-adventure actually plays.

Fobbed off by the jittery woman, you (and Zoë) start to become suspicious. Suddenly, the screen that dominates the foyer blooms into life, showing a terrified woman, screaming silently and desperately into a CCTV lens. It's a bizarre, shocking moment. The receptionist remains oblivious to the screen behind her; you struggle to make sense of the distressing image. Whatever is happening is clearly happening now, and it's clearly happening here. And now you face your first choice. If you're a careful player, you've taken the chance to scope out the room and spotted a nearby storage cupboard. A little resourceful wheedling cons the receptionist into checking in the cupboard for your package, giving you the chance to lock her inside and set off in search of the screaming woman. Less careful players? "You're going to have to fight this woman and take her out," says Tørnquist. There's a pause. What? It's hard to explain how unusual this proposition is. In a few short



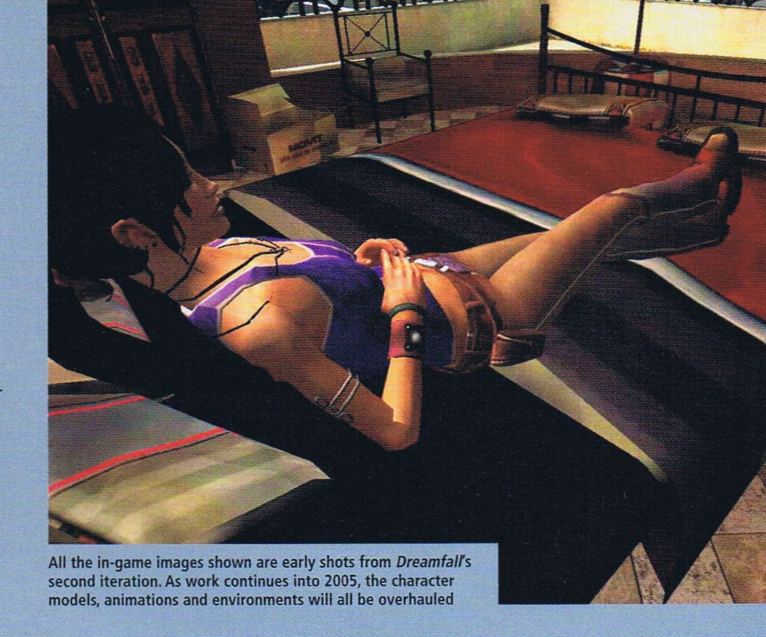
THE LONGER JOURNEY

Dreamfall's predecessor, *The Longest Journey* (below), is worth revisiting not least because it demonstrates so dramatically how far games have moved forward in the last five years – and how far they still have to go.

It's an infuriating title in many respects. Many who enjoyed the puzzles found the game's lengthy conversations a passive and frustrating chore. Those who revelled in the unusually high quality of scripting, characterisation and voice acting were often infuriated by trekking back and forth to combine item X with item Y. What united everyone who played it was a passionate enthusiasm for the art direction, the potential of which was only hinted at by the technology of the time. Similarly unifying was an affection for April, as most players found it largely impossible to remain impassive towards her as they uncovered the shards of her distressing earlier life. Five years on, there are only a handful of games to have matched it.

In other areas, however, player expectations have soared. Innovations in AI and emergent play have revolutionised how we interact with the worlds we visit. Improvements in control systems and camera design have changed how we expect to move. As a result, *TLJ* has dated badly. Less sophisticated point-and-clicks stand the test of time better – courtesy of nostalgia-tinted spectacles. *TLJ* is too modern in its ambitions and too traditional in its mechanisms to survive as a true classic.





All the in-game images shown are early shots from *Dreamfall*'s second iteration. As work continues into 2005, the character models, animations and environments will all be overhauled

minutes, New Casablanca has lulled us into such a sense of normality that the thought of walking into an office and clocking out the receptionist is profoundly absurd, screaming woman or no.

Tørnquist is implacably confident that the world he has created is coherent enough to withstand the extremity of the moment: "Zoë's not going to walk into a place and go gung-ho and Rambo. That's just not going to happen. She's driven into this fight in self defence, and it's something she's torn about afterwards. Also, she just can't take a lot of punches. She's not buff – and nor is she Buffy. She knows a few moves from her self-defence class, but she doesn't stand a chance against someone who's bigger than her or properly trained." As a result, the player can engineer it so that Zoë never has to fight. "She's a talker," it's explained, someone who gets out of situations by being smart. This consistency is also applied to the game's other characters.

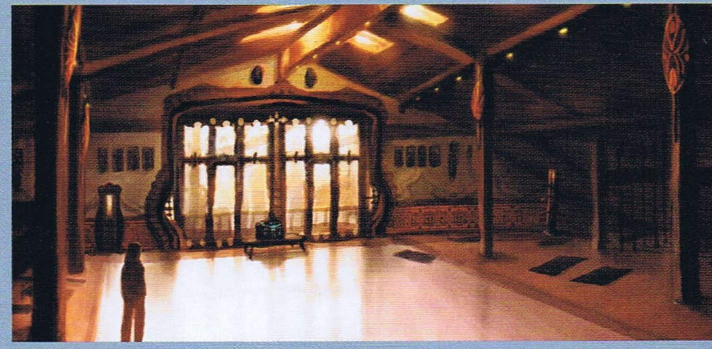


New Casablanca is a mix of tradition and sci-fi, and designed so that you don't notice that you can't reach distant landmarks

April, back from the first game, had a tough childhood that has prepared her for a tougher adventure: "She's someone who's had to fend for herself on the streets, so she's had to learn how to take care of herself." Kian, another new character, is a mysterious assassin, and as a result has the skills that mean he doesn't need to shy away from a fight.

This coherence between each character's past and the future you map out for them in the game is what lies at the heart of *Dreamfall*'s strength. This is a game of real roleplay, one where you step into the shoes of a fully formed person, and this, confusingly, means to Tørnquist that "*Dreamfall* isn't an RPG. You're not creating a character. This isn't Zoë's birth. She's been around for 20 years." It's an issue that produces a fundamental problem for adventure game scriptwriters. "The player is put in the shoes of someone who knows the world well, and that's always a challenge. It's something we're really struggling to get right, so that the conversations sound natural and we don't turn one of the characters into Mr Exposition," says Tørnquist. "Especially when it comes to characters like Zoë's dad and her ex, people you have very little 'face time' with. It means we're not afraid to mention things that the player doesn't know but that Zoë does. It adds a sense of history. You don't have to explain *everything*."

It's a conundrum that adds a twist when Zoë revisits locations that are new to her, but will be familiar to players of *TLJ*. Suddenly, she doesn't know where she is, but the player knows every inch of the familiar ground. Except it's not quite how you remember it. "Here we are at Border House," says Tørnquist, in tour-guide mode, gesturing to a bleak scene. "And here's the bench. Now broken. Really, everything you know has been broken. We do subscribe to that idea that you build things up and then you break them down. Everything was lovely in the first game and everything is horrible















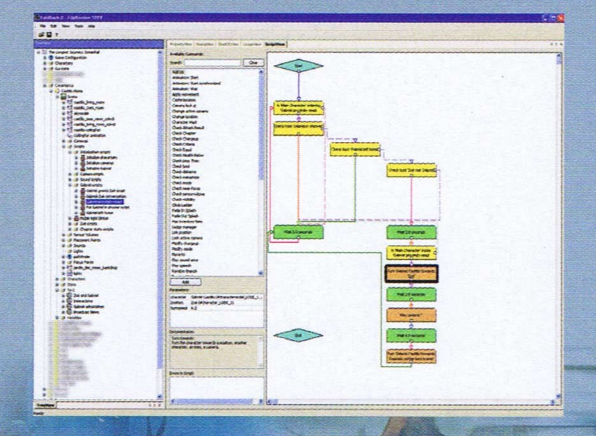

Although her essential character design never changed, Zoë went through a number of subtle refinements before the team settled on her final, elegant look

now. This is our Empire Strikes Back. This is where things go to hell."

Things are going to hell because *Dreamfall* has that most rare of videogame features: a theme. "When we decided to make a sequel we knew the broad strokes of the world, and we knew how it was going to change. But when we created the characters we tried to think about what we wanted to say with this game, because I think it's very important that a game should say something," explains Tørnquist. "So we sat down and tried to figure out what our story was about and realised it was about faith. Having faith, losing faith and acquiring faith. You find your theme and you end up building a lot of things around it." What *Dreamfall*'s team has ended up building is a terrifying structure that spirals into despair and madness. Loss of faith leads to disillusionment and hopelessness, and those who can't find a way to transform and regain faith sink down into spiritual death or obsession. Every character, major or minor, cycles through this journey. Every location's mood is plotted on this graph. The team are evangelical about the coherence and rigour it brings to game design, but well aware of how pretentious it might sound.

"We're not going to have it on the back of the box – a thing headed 'Themes' and then bullet points: Faith, Loss Of Faith, Hopelessness," spoofs Tørnquist. "And we don't have signs up all around saying REMEMBER FAITH. But I think that people – even the ones who are hostile to the idea of games being taken too seriously – enjoy the dimension that this kind of thinking can bring. I don't think we're doing anything exceptionally brilliant – we're just recognising the fact that there's always going to be a subtext no matter what you do. To be conscious of it allows you to use it better."

It's a remarkable viewpoint. Most conversations about depth in videogaming begin with the question of whether or not subtext is even possible in games. Tørnquist starts with the conviction that it's unavoidable. Although he grew up a gamer, his training is in filmmaking, and he brings from that medium some assumptions gaming would do well do adopt. He expects the people he creates to look like people and sound like people – *TLJ*, despite its sedate pace of play and lack of combat, was 18-rated. People swore and made seedy passes at each other. There were gay characters and black characters, realised well beyond any accusations of tokenism. There were people who took the rise if you



THE CHILLOUT ZONE

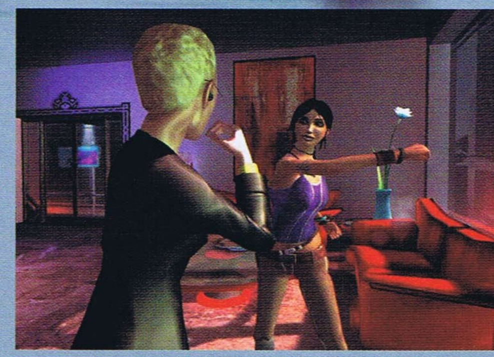
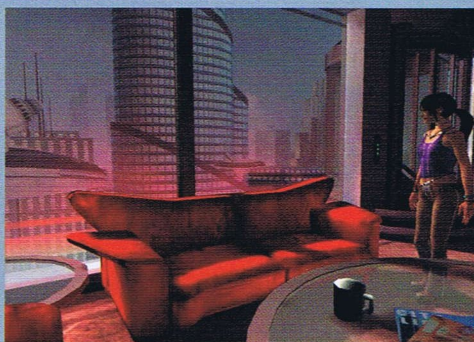
Dreamfall is being produced using an updated version of *TLJ*'s toolset. Named LAIDBACK (Level And Item Database BAck-end Code Kicker), it lives up to its name, protecting team members from nasty crunches by allowing them to work across the whole project organically, with artists able to drop in new enviroments and animations as they become available, and designers able to test gameplay ideas and tweak camera tracks in minutes. Particularly crucial for a game like *Dreamfall* is the simple, colour-coded system for managing the game's vast dialogue trees. It's approachable but powerful, and would in theory enable the artists and designers to produce an entirely new game without any input from programmers, although Tørnquist is quick to point out that the team always have too many new ideas for that to be a viable proposition.

> "Games are about characters, and having a sense of dialogue is very important. To me, that's gameplay"

approached and said to them 'Can I ask you some questions?' nine times in a row. But Tørnquist is quick to deflect the easy comparisons: "I don't see games as films at all. I want to get rid of cinematic sequences. I want to have control all the time. But games are about characters, and having a sense of dialogue is very important. Because to me, that's gameplay. Just walking up to a living creature, in a world which feels real, who has a job and a life and a voice."

It's too early in *Dreamfall*'s life to form any judgement of how well its ingredients will combine. The locations, both those finished and those still carved from textureless slabs of virtual clay, make you itch to explore. The characters are already so engaging that you don't want to be them, you want to be *with* them. *TLJ* has very effectively benchmarked the team's ability to create vibrant, convincing dialogue. But, while there's no doubting the clarity of thought that has gone into the game's challenges, or the validity of the intention behind the inclusion of combat, it's too soon to be sure. It won't be until all the elements are stitched together that the game will be able to prove if it has met its real challenge: to sustain the convincing portrayal of the complex human potential once it's placed its characters in the inevitably limited scenarios of a linear videogame.

It's a huge task, and makes you realise Tørnquist wasn't kidding: *Dreamfall* is all about faith. From what we've seen so far, however, the team is set to defy its own gloomy cycle.

Although the game is set 200 years in the future, the team has worked hard to ensure the technology available is plausible and coherent. "We ask ourselves 'why?' a lot," says Tørnquist. "Why does that work like that? Why does that happen like that? We don't just put things in because we think they would look cool"

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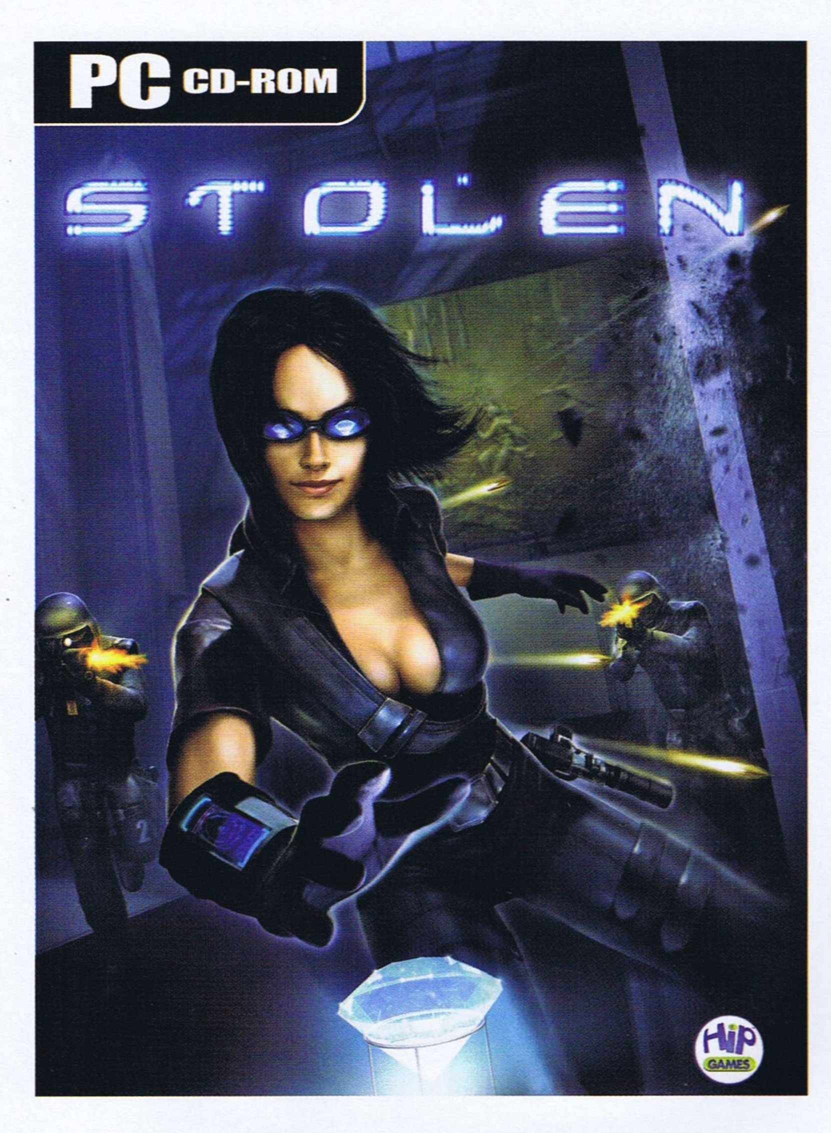
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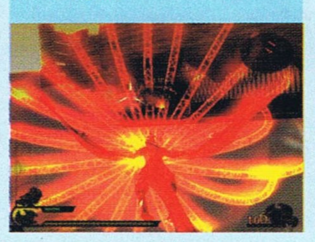


Review

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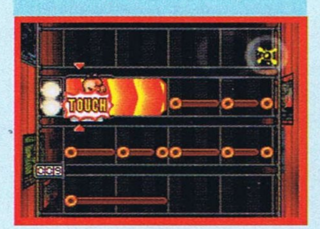
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Drakengard



Saving the world never felt so sordid as in Cavia's sociopath simulator. Both the bloodlust of ground combat and the soaring dragonflight can still impress.
PS2, SQUARE ENIX

Daigasso: Band Brothers



Billed as an eight-track music game, *Daigasso* really has 16 – since everyone playing is also laughing in delight. The Christmas medley became an instant office tradition.
DS, NINTENDO

TLOZ: Four Swords Adventures



There are times when it feels closer to a puppy-sim than anything else, as you scamper back and forth digging for treasure and shunting your playmates into the pond.
GC, NINTENDO

Future imperfect

Why you should drop your DS in a puddle



Please, no horrified letters. No PSPs were harmed in the production of this publication and the UMD was fully sterilised in **Edge**'s space-age lab

Two months, two console launches. There may never have been a better time to be a gamer. It's certainly a while since there's been a more expensive time, thanks to profit-grabbing import suppliers. But now the dust has settled. Both the DS and the PSP have been scrutinised and road tested, their games dissected and debated.

And yet, something feels a little strange. Both machines were supposed to change the way we related to the games we play – revolutionising their structure and presentation, evolving who played what and where and for how long. But the odd thing is that, by virtue of how exciting both machines are, it's entirely impossible to gauge what kind of impact they've had.

Playing your GBA on the way to work goes like this: squeeze on train, find seat, play GBA, get off train. Playing your PSP on the way to work goes like this: squeeze on train, find seat, carefully slide PSP out of case, pull out hem of T-shirt and adoringly polish screen. Watch *Ridge Racers* movie. Watch it again. Look up to see person next to you openly staring in amazement and get into a conversation about possible local release dates. Get off train without actually having played a thing.

The DS is no better – its looks engender such curiosity and its games bring about so much enjoyment that once you get it out it's passed from friend to friend and back again. The hours you rack up on *Mario* are nothing compared to the hours you've spent watching everyone else you know play it - And you enjoy the spectator role.

The problem is that the nature of what both machines are trying to do – to integrate gaming more closely into our daily lives, to make them portable, personal, social, adaptable – can't happen until we start to take them for granted. These machines weren't designed to be a 16-hours-a-day fascination, they were designed to be a 20-minutes-at-a-time diversion. The real face of the revolution isn't last month's gleaming hardware. The real face of the revolution is a PSP with its corners scuffed and scraped and a DS with a cocktail stick for a stylus.

Can you honestly imagine anything better?







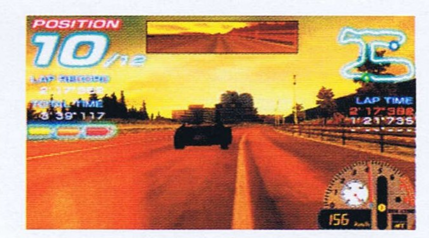
Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



RIDGE RACERS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥5,040 ($62)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), AUTUMN (AU)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE





Over-saturated sunset races are a visual highlight, with several reverse courses transformed by a lighting change



The display's sharpness gives *Racers* an impressive sense of distance, with the road distinguishable out to the horizon



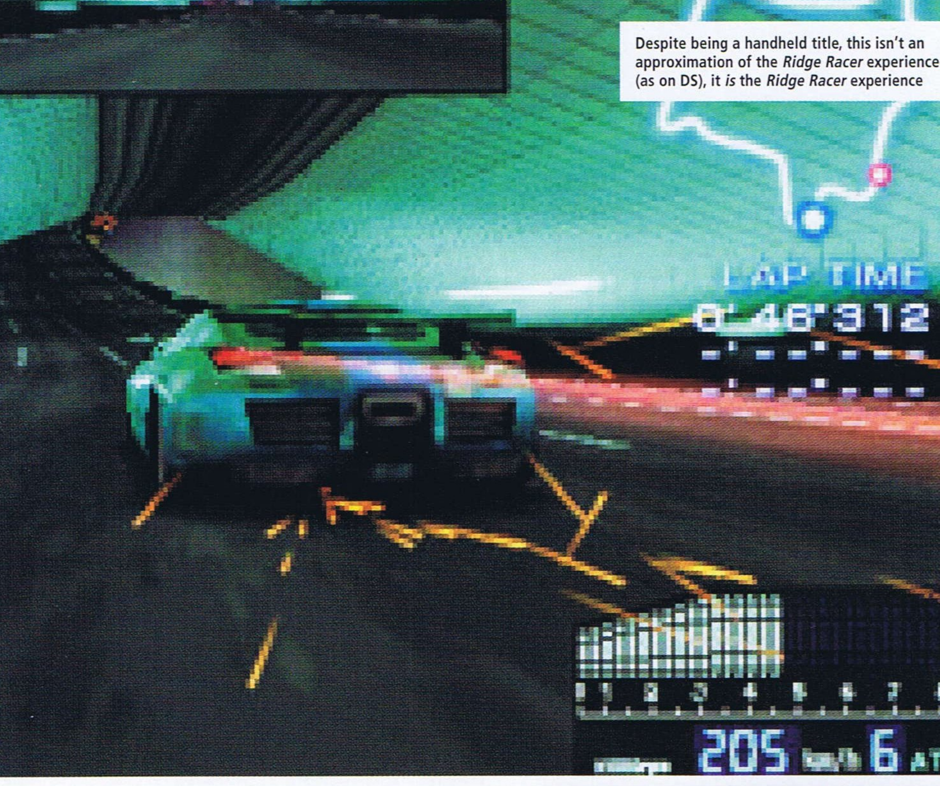
There's a wait with any game for the first moment of absolute connection: *Ridge Racers* has it down to 30 seconds into the opening race, as you twist through that bayside corner where a Namco-blue sea stretches out to a Namco-blue sky and an impossibly low-flying airliner sweeps into view. Your car's back end starts its pendulous outward swing, sun glare flashes across Tarmac, the wheels reconcile their directions, the jet thunders overhead towards New Ridge Airport.

Even if you knew it was coming, it's never felt quite as enthralling as it does here (so much that you may forget the approaching chicane you also supposedly knew was coming). Take first place, and the period between crossing the line and relinquishing control to the replay is exactly long enough to pull a triumphant 1,080-degree spin. This is a game built with an economy of thrill per millisecond in mind, befitting the new handheld context and providing the urgency of *Ridge*'s arcade roots that previous home versions occasionally lacked.

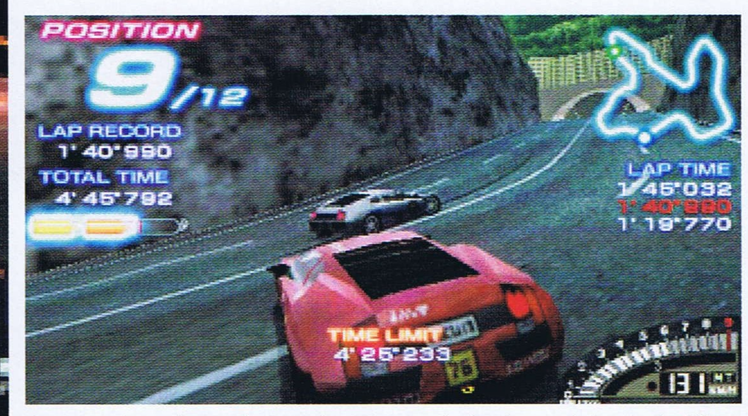
And though *Racers* has it all – quantity and quality of cherrypicked historical courses, an immersive audio treatment that captures the sound of speed, an original soundtrack that's arguably the best *Ridge* collection yet and, to test that argument, an additional 12 tracks and six remixes from previous games – it's the drift that brings it together. Owing as much to air hockey as it does to automotive physics, *Racers* distills each tweak its predecessors brought to the mechanic: tight enough that control isn't surrendered on every turn, loose enough that you don't so much take hairpin bends as orbit them.

Overtaking a rival at right angles to their car or traversing an S-bend in a single time-dilating oversteer are experiences as attainable as they are exhilarating, constant reinforcement that the drift is the arcade racer's all-in-one smart bomb and hyperspace. This sensation of invincibility isn't entirely imagined, as provided you enter a drift successfully the game can be relied upon to nudge your car around corners until you steer out – encouraging high-level play where as much of the course as possible is crossed in a continuous slide.

Drift time doesn't just benefit your lap records: it also charges your nitro boosts, a familiar device in initially unfamiliar surroundings. Fears that it would prove either token or game-breaking are both unfounded – ultimately, a boost is only as useful as a drift, requiring the same split-second equations of risk and reward, timing and temperance. Ground gained by tearing up a straight can be quickly lost to a determined pursuer (especially one with a boost in reserve), producing exhilarating fakeouts in an attempt to force rivals to go for the trigger first. More effective is the ability to



Despite being a handheld title, this isn't an approximation of the *Ridge Racer* experience (as on DS), it *is* the *Ridge Racer* experience



It's surprising how unobtrusive the seemingly massive screen furniture becomes during play. The ability to scan details with a moment of peripheral attention is more than welcome when the game hits top gear

make up for a wall clip that could have cost the race with a nitro-charged jump back to top speed, or a boost to spur on a howling engine in a painfully sub-200mph hill climb.

Racers' biggest surprise, though, isn't the high-performance mechanics behind its cars, but the sheer volume of the world around them. The centrepiece World Tours eke every last mile out of the courses and connect them beyond being a simple anthology, finding a global diversity between *RRV's* deceptively gentle underpasses and the sine-wave mountain trails of *Rage Racer*. It's this sense of character – a world of empty highways waiting with held breath for green lights and redlines – that ensures even if the Basic tours don't put up much in the way of challenge for experienced players, it doesn't affect the joy of racing.



> Racers' biggest surprise, though, isn't the high-performance mechanics behind its cars, but the sheer volume of the world around them

As the game's speed gently accelerates into the higher car classes and reverse tracks of the Pro tours, though, the margin for any error decreases, proving the more sedate tours to be an essential test drive. At *Racers'* most intense it's dizzyingly fast: a high-class car will reach the point that begins this review five seconds ahead of schedule (and outrun the jet), and races will turn on a moment's hesitation in an aggressive drift with the pack leaders.

But unlike its console predecessors, even the most faint-hearted drivers are likely to see the Pro races – and beyond, as there's an EX series waiting to round out the World Tours – thanks to a generous unlocking schedule that seldom bottlenecks on one particular event. In another departure, it's not necessary to complete an entire event in one sitting, nor is there a limit on the amount of retry attempts. While this may soften the competitive edge somewhat, it's an appreciation of handheld play, and perhaps just as much a show of affection from a game that wants you to fall in love with it all over again, experience all it has to offer.

Despite its importance as a statement of intent for the PSP, or for a franchise which has taken some confused drifts of its own in recent years, *Racers* has an appealing lack of pretension that suggests it has nothing to prove other than that *Ridge Racer* is a delight to play. And it is, with no call for caveat – for a handheld, for a 'remake', for a launch title. It's simply one of the best pure arcade racers to date. **[8]**



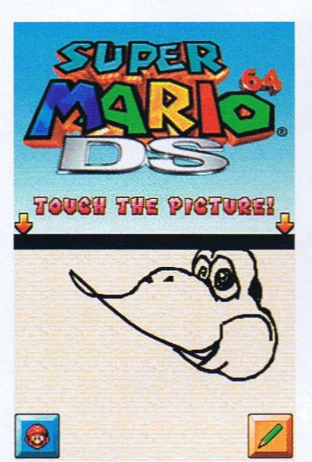


The announcer may prove more of an acquired taste, but his breathless praise of your every slingshot drift – and a rose-tinted headphones-pleasing reprise of "Somebody's right on your TAIL!" – is delivered with enough genuine fervour to make silencing it seem downright crotchety

Driftism



After an unwelcome pit call to sober reality in *R: Racing*, *Racers* makes a brazen return to the self-referential spirit of the classic *Ridge* series. Classic Namco arcade placards plaster scenery and vehicles alike, car manufacturers sport breathlessly cool/ridiculous monikers, and the World Tour events namecheck the breadth of '90s electronica with increasingly groan-inducing puns. It's good to be back.



Before you reach the irresistible minigames, you can play with Mario and Yoshi's faces, in a neat little homage to the original's opening screen. As well as stretching and twirling them, you can draw and deform your own sketches



SUPER MARIO 64 DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $69.95 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 24
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Ever since its release, gaming commentators have struggled to write the perfect essay on *Mario 64*. Something to capture its accomplishments as eloquently as it catalogued its flaws; something to convey its irrepressible joy as well as codifying its structural innovations. But doing justice to the dynamism of videogames with staid, static words has never been easy, and Nintendo has just rendered the exercise entirely pointless. This DS conversion is the finest dissertation on *Mario 64* you will ever read.

It's hard to imagine a more thankless task than being asked to retool a game which is famed for the perfect symbiosis it shared with its original platform; it's also hard to imagine how the company could have done a better job. *Mario 64 DS* is a testament to how well Nintendo understands its own game. What makes it so interesting is that it's also a testament to how much and how little gaming has changed since Mario first woh-hoo'd his way into 3D.

Mario 64 – whether on an N64 or a DS – is extraordinary. It's become a trope of lazy journalism to accuse every derivative platformer of the last eight years of being an equally lazy 'Mario clone', but none of the copycats have come anywhere close. No one has dared replicate the freeform structure, leaving scores of challenges open to the player at any one time. No one has hidden whole worlds away, curtained behind fake walls and disguised by magic mirrors. And those worlds themselves are like nothing before or since. Rather than taking its set of building blocks and skinning each identikit level in spring/summer/winter or lava/ice/beach, Nintendo takes you to places which are intimidatingly bizarre. Instead of safe, flat playgrounds or fat tunnels of fun, these are levels that have outhouses, detours and lost, subterranean towns. They're irregular and asymmetric, awkward and intriguing, and the changes that you bring – though basic and blocky by current standards – remain magical. For nostalgic veterans and wide-eyed newcomers, Mario offers as vibrant an adventure now as he did then.

Which is all to the good, because it's an adventure which is fundamentally incompatible with the DS's controls. Let's be clear: the controls work. There's no doubt that they function effectively and it's an enormous credit to Nintendo that they do so at all. The three options allow you a good choice of compromises, swapping between D-pad and touchscreen with easy – and necessary – improvisation. However, even once you've rewired your brain to adjust to these new control patterns, it will never feel like anything other than a compromise. The elation of simple movement, which will perhaps remain *Mario 64*'s most significant contribution to the gaming canon, cannot be replicated on such an ill-suited device. And the consequence of this inherent clumsiness is a subtle and strange recalibration of the familiar *Mario 64* universe.

Planks are wider (or is Mario smaller?), enemies have shrunk (or has Mario grown?).







New bosses call for new powers. Mario can supersize himself, which makes this giant Goomba easier to defeat



Some sights are almost as awe-inspiring now as they were eight long years ago. It's in these notoriously tricky later levels that the shortcomings of the new control systems become most clearly exposed



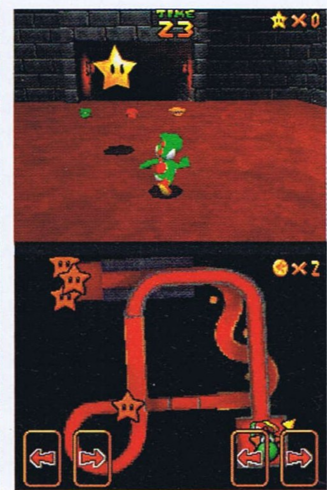






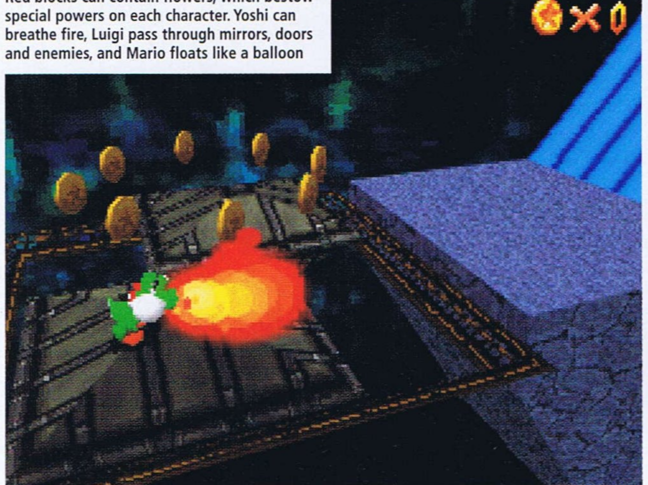






Multiplayer courses include slide races as well as battle arenas. For added confusion, character-swapping caps are dotted around each level, letting you morph from one Mushroom Kingdom stalwart to another

Red blocks can contain flowers, which bestow special powers on each character. Yoshi can breathe fire, Luigi pass through mirrors, doors and enemies, and Mario floats like a balloon





An unexpected consequence of the rejigged control system is that both flying and swimming have become easier. This removes both some of the joy and the frustration

New power-ups are tucked into the game's tougher challenges, letting Mario float dumbly up to a precarious ledge where once he had to scramble smartly. The three other characters all possess abilities which shortcut the game's challenges, letting you hover mid-jump, run over water or destroy multiple enemies. But even once you've explained these away in terms of the hampered control scheme, the concessions keep coming. Helpful bob-ombs now provide a map for each level's eight red stars, taking some of the challenge (and all of the frustration) out of combing each area for that tell-tale wink of scarlet. It seems that Nintendo has looked at the new generation of gamers the DS is intended to court and decided that they aren't up to the starkness of the challenge on which the last generation cut their teeth.

It has certainly decided that they have more delicate eyes: as part of Mario's reworking, his colours have been muted and modernised. The sharp blocks of pure primary have been replaced with softer, subtler textures. It's a purely aesthetic change which some will resent and some will applaud, but what's inexplicable is the reworking of NPC design, the elegant cartoons of the original having been replaced with the bug-eyed, fat-grinned caricatures of a thousand kids' TV shows .

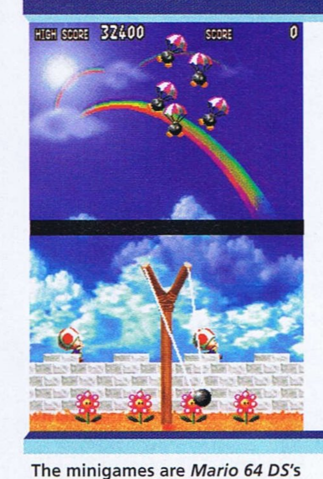


The other additions – the silver star challenges, the hidden levels, the extra boss battles – range from harmless bonuses to genuine improvements

It's a rare lapse of judgement. The difficulty tweaks and the new characters are a necessary and appropriate evil to sustain the game in its new, twin-screen environment. The other additions – the silver star challenges, the new hidden levels, the extra boss battles – range from harmless bonuses to genuine improvements. The minigames (see 'Mini mope') will become constant DS companions, and multiplayer (beamable to other, non *Mario*-equipped DSs) successfully replicates the knockabout amusements of *Mario Kart*'s Battle mode.

It's clear what *Mario 64 DS* is. Nintendo has sped its console to market in a timeframe which left it needing a revolutionary launch title and not enough time to make one. As a result, it had to abandon the possibility of making a new game to showcase the DS's strange talents, and settle instead for making new a game it already had. It succeeded, but *Mario 64 DS* is a magnificent execution of entirely the wrong content. Happily, despite its age, that content is so robust and remarkable that the result is still surprising, spectacular and, yes, downright Super. **[8]**

Mini mope



The minigames are *Mario 64 DS*'s final contradiction: a kiss on the cheek and a kick in the teeth. Despite very obviously being designed to cater for those moments when you're sick of (or stuck in) the main game, or when you want to demonstrate the DS's touchscreen to a sceptical friend, you'll have to unlock each one in turn by catching rabbits with each of the four characters in the main game. It's an unnecessary restriction on one of the game's greatest strengths. These are some of the finest idle diversions unleashed since *Tetris*.



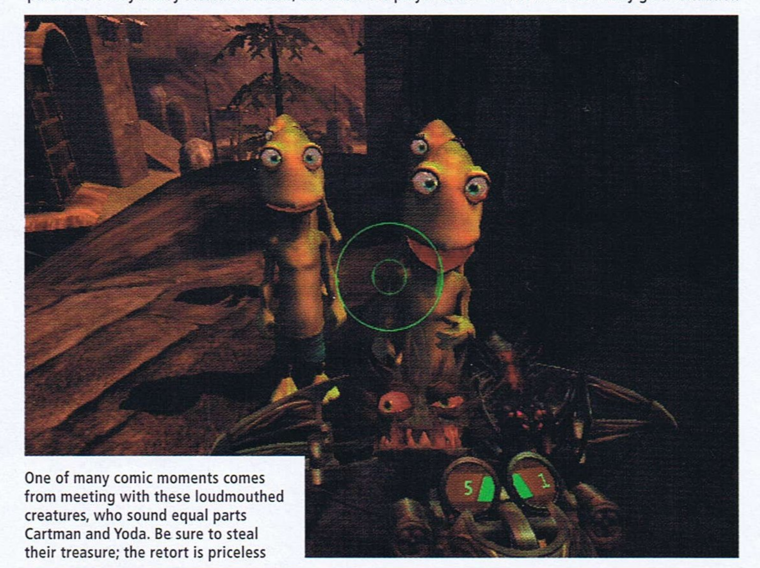
ODDWORLD: STRANGER'S WRATH

FORMAT: XBOX **PRICE:** $99.95 **RELEASE:** MARCH 4 **PUBLISHER:** EA
DEVELOPER: ODDWORLD INHABITANTS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E1, E3

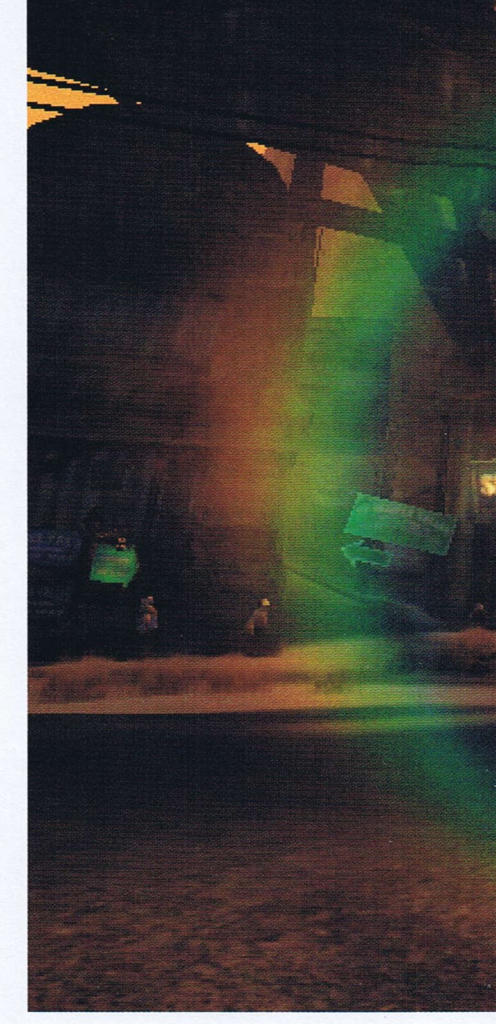




In general, outlaws are hard of hearing and forgetful but have excellent eyesight. These well-defined parameters may annoy stealth veterans, but allow the player to act with confidence in any given situation



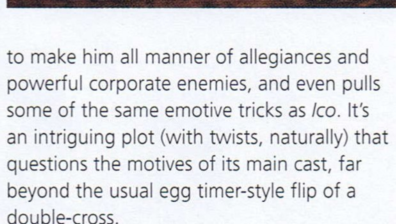
One of many comic moments comes from meeting with these loudmouthed creatures, who sound equal parts Cartman and Yoda. Be sure to steal their treasure; the retort is priceless



Perhaps the greatest thing about *Stranger's Wrath* is just how little the game has been exposed and uncovered during its gestation. Having been passed between publishers and mooted for conversions, *Stranger's Wrath* has snuck its way to release rather quietly in the wake of 2004's software and hardware jamboree.

On playing the game, there's a feeling of freshness, invention and accomplishment, partly down to how little of the game's considerable bulk has been revealed to date. But it's mostly down to something else: *Strangers Wrath* is a magnificent game, not so much a revolution as an evolutionary bound over other combat-heavy console titles. It is Oddworld Inhabitants' most conventional and conformist title yet – a stealthy action adventure – but one that fulfils the potential of that description to the point of nearly subverting the genre when compared to its typical output.

It's a shockingly violent game, from exploding bodies to the sheer brutality of enemy firepower, never revelling in gore but also never shying away from the viciousness of pitched combat. The traditional eco concerns of *Oddworld*'s Abe are lowest on the agenda, it seems. Stranger's own spur is soon revealed to be his need to gather money for a mysterious operation for his 'condition', a thread that goes on to make him all manner of allegiances and powerful corporate enemies, and even pulls some of the same emotive tricks as *Ico*. It's an intriguing plot (with twists, naturally) that questions the motives of its main cast, far beyond the usual egg timer-style flip of a double-cross.



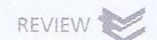
Last month's preview drew favourable comparisons with *Manhunt*: the fuss-free, laid-back stealth parameters, the cutthroat intensity of the combat, the confident and atmosphere-rich style. Upon getting deeper into this particular *Oddworld*, however, a different association soon pushes through: *Halo*. And not just because of a rechargeable energy bar. Stranger's double-barrelled crossbow and use of imaginative 'live' ammunition swiftly cause favourite dual-wielding weapon combinations to emerge and evolve, and the subtleties quickly become visible. Bolamites (spiders used to subdue enemies in webbing), for example, don't appear to be that far removed from the shock-serving Zapflies (your basic, infinite stock of ammo), until the latter's need to recharge and its tendency to knock enemies backward becomes a tangible, wieldable part of the strategy.

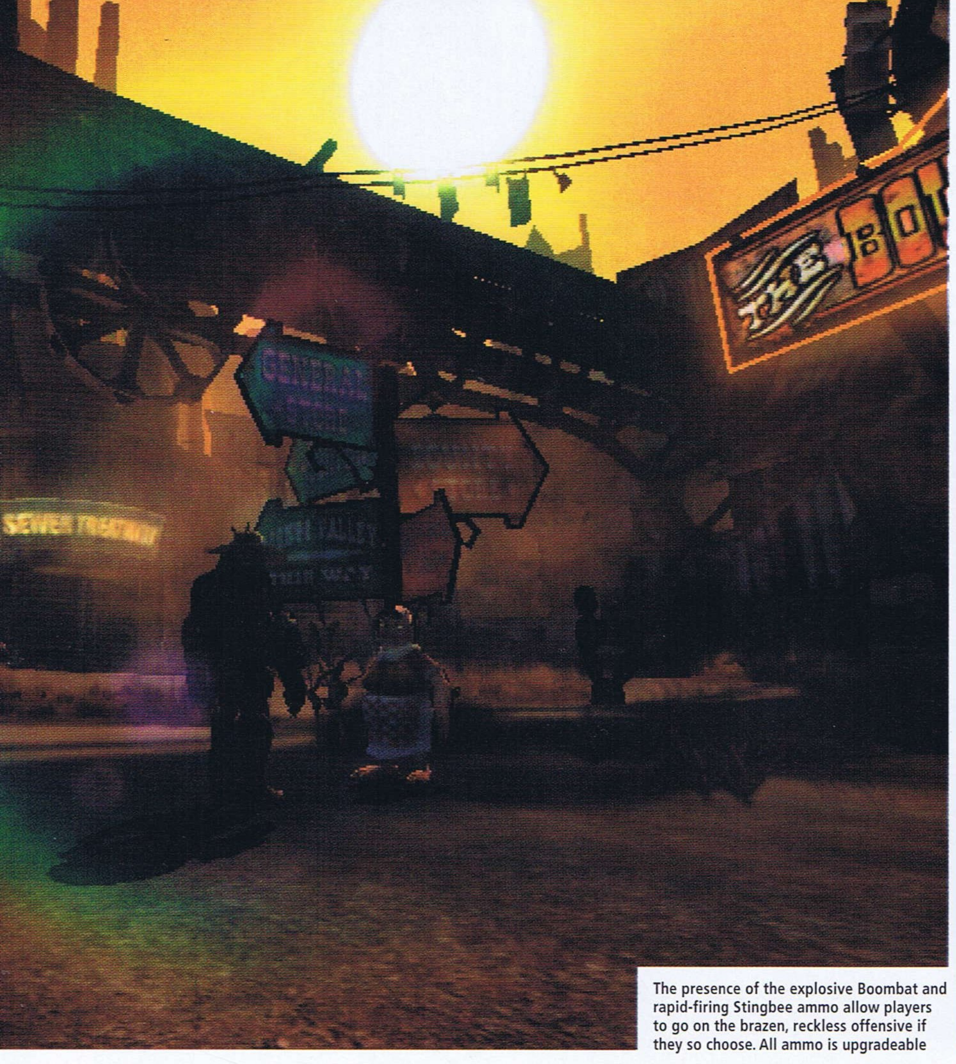
Enemy types feel distinctly *Halo*-like, too. There's not much variety in types of opponent, but they're individual to the extent that differing combinations of them











The presence of the explosive Boombat and rapid-firing Stingbee ammo allow players to go on the brazen, reckless offensive if they so choose. All ammo is upgradeable



Main character Stranger is a bona fide badass, a moody enigma whose heroic reputation is offset by plenty of swearing, spitting and telling jokes with his fists. The game's Wild West theme has been borrowed brilliantly, and Stranger himself remains one of the most memorable and audacious game characters around as well as a well-modelled one

can change things significantly. And that, maybe, will be a problem for some players. Those who were left cold by *Halo*, tackling slightly different combinations of enemy types in slightly different circumstances over and over again, will feel equally dulled here. When the combat is this flexible, energetic and graceful, however, the game deserves as many fans as Bungie's firstperson franchise. *Stranger's Wrath* goes one further, though, by seamlessly blending third- and firstperson frameworks to synergetic effect, the former allowing for some swift and agile movement, and the latter bringing precise, technical combat into the fray.

The first half of the game is concerned with bounty hunting, of capturing notorious outlaws in return for 'moolah', Oddworld's currency. It's in these sections that stealth can be used as a fundamental part of play, allowing for an approach that's anything in between cautious and cavalier; stragglers can be distracted and mopped up before dashing into the remaining pack for some chaotic kills. The inclusion of a quicksave option may seem to be pace-breaking, but allows conscientious baby-step players to shuffle along at their own pace, while removing the fear of experimentation, meaning tactics can be as dull or risky as you like.

The latter half of the game sees Stranger's role twisted around somewhat, moving the pace up a gear and removing the need to bounty outlaws. It's a more action-oriented gallop, but the game compensates by handing you some maniacally destructive ammo types, and segues smoothly into a blazing, breathtaking series of firefights. While the game is seductively pretty in general, its closing portion is phenomenal. It seems like such short months since games like *Fable*, *Sudeki*, *Riddick* and – to some extent – *Halo 2* were praised for pushing graphical envelopes, but there's nothing there that can touch *Stranger*'s final straight. However jaded towards the action the player may feel during that concluding stretch, it's buoyed immeasurably by a game world that keeps bettering itself, until some kind of disbelief sets in. This dazzling technical feat is mirrored by some terrifyingly fast loading times, with no in-game loading and restarts from *any* save point in the whole world taking around two seconds.

It's frightening to think of how anything in this current generation can leapfrog it, really. But, ultimately, that's all the more reason to enjoy it

Stranger's Wrath is perhaps too long for its own good, however. When the combat is so continually intense and punishing that, no matter how brilliantly it's realised, it can begin to feel like an exhausting grind. Outlaws keep appearing in their droves, and the need to treat each encounter as its own dynamic set-piece can become draining. Also, some of the later bosses rely on weak-spot activations and attack patterns, and feel like a step backwards when compared to those early bounty hunting-based confrontations, which feel far more manic, malleable, freeform and explosive by comparison.

But perhaps the worst thing of all about *Stranger's Wrath* is just how effortless it feels: everything is so incredibly assured, the game engine never, *ever* creaks despite bearing an unbelievable load on its shoulders, it's actually funny, it's sleekly designed, it's rigged with imaginative characters and fizzes with life. Architecture is of a scale and intricacy rarely seen, mixing *Halo*'s fat expanses with *Metroid Prime*'s panoramic environmental details, all drizzled with Oddworld's slick organic style, giving cause to sightsee and lollygag at every other turn. It's frightening to think of how anything in this current generation can leapfrog it, really. But, ultimately, that's all the more reason to enjoy it. **[9]**

Ins and outlaws

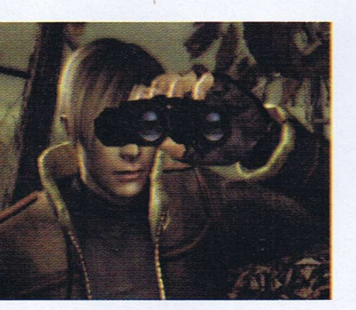


Outlaws can be captured dead or alive, and cashing in live bounties reaps greater cash rewards. There's no serious return for earning plenty of money, however, as the game doesn't rate your humanity any, and offers only a few basic upgrades via the towns' general stores. The bounty hunting aspect vanishes altogether after a certain point, and the whole game steps away from the Western theme and into more industrial territory. After this shift in the tone, enemies can still be subdued and captured, but they're instantly converted into 'ammo chow', replenishing your critters as you go. Dead bodies, however, will rot away quickly if not captured, and if you're a bit overzealous with your riot-upgraded Thudslugs you may just end up obliterating bodies completely.



RESIDENT EVIL 4

FORMAT: GC PRICE: $99.95
RELEASE: MARCH PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: PRODUCTION STUDIO 4





It's time to be scared. Capcom, and those they've inspired, have been soft on us all for years – The survival-horror genre has really been a glorified puzzle game with token action-elements. Disagree? After taking in all the revolutionary changes *Resident Evil 4* makes to the series, it becomes apparent just how little there's really been to fear in the pioneering years of the genre. Those days are over, this is a true gaming renaissance.

Capcom has washed its hands of the tired old *Resident Evil* backstory to throw the player into the unfamiliar. An introductory narrative from the game's protagonist, Leon S. Kennedy (*Resident Evil 2*), recaps the events that have transpired in earlier Resident Evil games, with the final image we're left with seeing the Umbrella symbol falling apart, presumably doing away with their hand in the series' story.

All the player truly knows is that Leon is working directly for the President of the United States, and has been charged the task of tracking down the First Daughter who was kidnapped by an unknown terrorist group. The trail leads Leon to a remote rustic mansion, hidden deep within rural continental Europe, a far cry from Racoon City, USA.

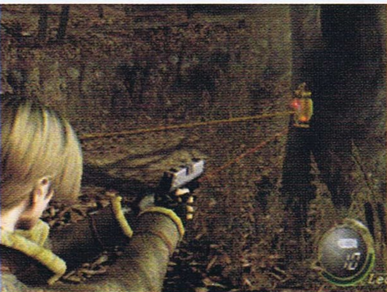
But it's not the broken English of the mainland Europeans, or the coffee that actually has some kick or even the lack of familiar foes that makes *Resident Evil 4* different – it's the lack of places that Leon is truly safe that makes earlier games in the series feel timid. Capcom have clearly taken a step back and rethought the game design to deliver the same sort of uncomfortable tension and suspense that a sitting of Dawn of the Dead will inspire.

The move from 2D backgrounds with 3D properties to full 360-degree movement is a predictable one. Hand-drawn settings once covered for the shortcomings of 3D graphics, but there's no longer a need to do this, and *Resident Evil 4's* lush, colourful haunts and richly-detailed denizens prove the point.

What's not so predictable is the same phenomena that has scared horror-flick characters since their beginning – the forces of evil are unrelenting in their pursuit of the heroes (victims) of the story, even if that means tearing down the house. In the past Leon simply had to head to the nearest doorway to escape the clutches of his foes, but now that won't cut it. A part of the reason is that the game engine allows the enemy to bludgeon their way through closed doors, and in rare instances, even through walls. It's a true case of 'You can run, but you can't hide'.

There's one last facet of the *Resident Evil*





The village of Pueblo is riddle with booby traps, and while we won't spoil the surprise, we suggest you 'play' with the traps you find. Not just for your safety, but more for your viewing pleasure.



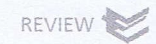
Once you come across the President's daughter you'll have to guide her to safety, don't worry though, Capcom has done their research and the protect missions are no where near as annoying as other titles, and can actually



Leon can perform a number of different actions in the game, including using certain objects or vehicles, like this boat. However, these moments are few and far between though they offer a nice break in gameplay.

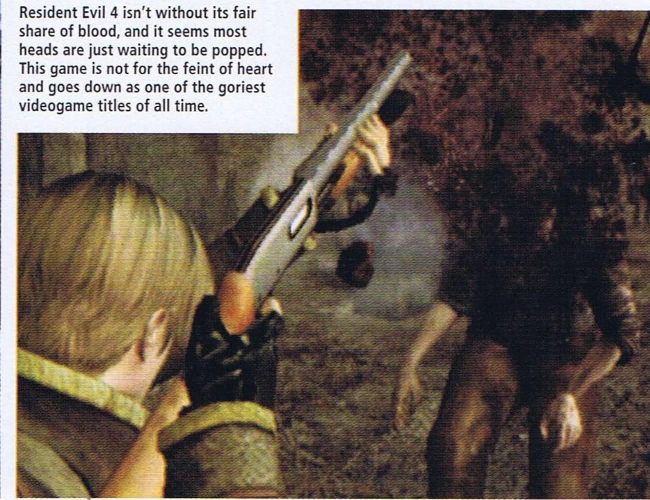


The forces of evil are unrelenting in their pursuit of the heroes of the story, even if that means tearing down the house...





Resident Evil 4 isn't without its fair share of blood, and it seems most heads are just waiting to be popped. This game is not for the feint of heart and goes down as one of the goriest videogame titles of all time.

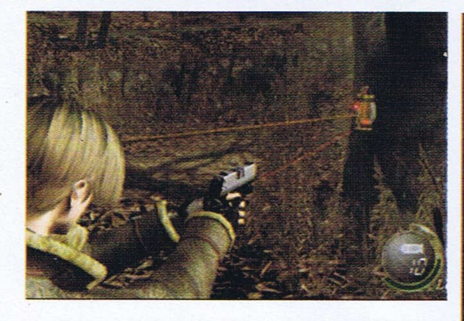








Some enemies in the game can be shaken off if you're grabbed. This guy, however, who pops up at the worst possible times (being all the time, really), cannot be shaken off and invariably uses his chainsaw to great affect. Be warned.





The bosses in Resident Evil 4 are amazing. This fellow, for example, is absolutely huge, stunningly animated and downright scary. But he's not the only big boss you'll face and certainly no representation of how imaginative bosses that follow are.

series that's undergone dramatic change, and that's the 'enemy' itself. The hallmark mindless zombie has been replaced with endless droves of highly organised villagers, who are clearly suffering from some eldritch sort of mania or malaise. They're not so much faster or more powerful than the classic zombie, but they're more cunning and varied in their pursuit of the player. Some suddenly cast knives through the air, others use ladders to scale their way into a seemingly secure loft and, like a scene from Frankenstein, villagers will happily torch a structure that houses that which they hate. That's arguably the most succinct way to describe what makes *Resident Evil 4's* adversaries seem so terrifying – they clearly hate the player, even more than they care to stay 'alive'.

Naturally, Capcom weren't foolish enough to exclude all the trademarks of one of their most popular series. The most incredulous is the continued use of digital controls, but there's none of the dire slow-turning frustrations here. The analogue stick intuitively sends the player in the desired direction, and only the need to use the 'B' button to sprint prevents movement from being analogue in nature.

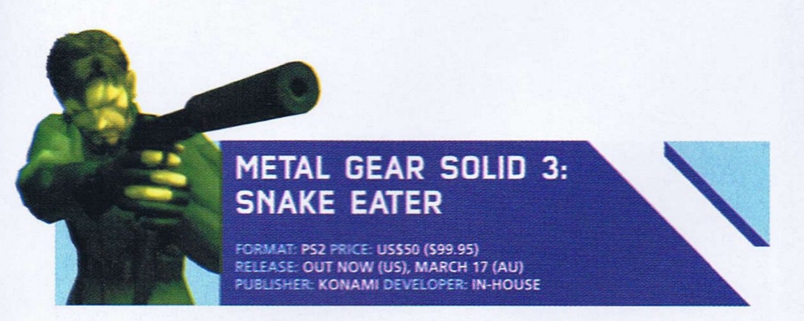
It's a liberating dose of speed for fans of the series, but there's still no strafe, and Leon must still be stationary to shoot and reload. This is as cumbersome and annoying as it sounds on paper, but this is not the same clunker its predecessors were. Capcom have addressed the issue of sluggish handling by working in a series of context sensitive actions so Leon can interact with the chaos around him in a fluid manner. Turning to the *Dragon's Lair* approach of removing the stiffness of the earlier games will disappoint those dextrous enough to master twitch controls, but all players will appreciated the difference this system makes to the pace and presentation of the game.

If we gamers are lucky, Resident Evil 4 will remind us that breaking away from a successful formula is essential to prevent a series from stagnating. Only by presenting us with something so much better have Capcom highlighted just how much damage sticking with tradition can do to even the most popular gaming franchises. **[9]**

Context Sensitive Horror

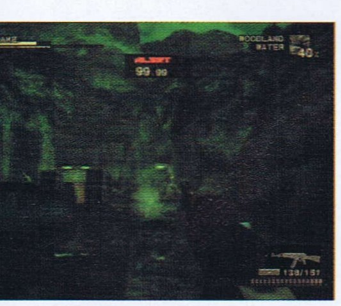


One of the unique aspects of controlling Resident Evil 4 is the inclusion of Context Sensitive actions at the push of only the 'A' button. What this means is if Leon is facing a window that looks like he would be able to escape through, an 'A' button icon will flash with an action command giving you accessible and quick access to the action needed. This idea frees up the controller and opens the game up for ease of play, which works wonders given the heated situation at hand. Equally, most actions can be repeated if similar situations repeat themselves allowing for quick-thinking.



METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: US$50 ($99.95)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), MARCH 17 (AU)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE





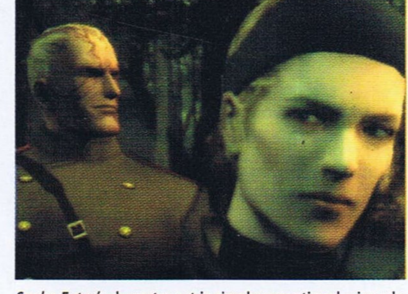
Firstperson gunplay will be a rude shock to the circle-strafing generation. Rooted to the spot and reticule-free, you'll have to guide your wavering aim with the sight on your gun. Holding your breath and tensing your arms aren't necessary, but it's so convincing, you will anyway

There's something about that subtitle… *Snake Eater*. Does it sound absurd or sinister, virile or camp? Was it meant as cheap innuendo or dark, Freudian suggestion? Was it intended to ring with mythic mystery, or flatly point to the game's USP? After playing (and watching) this extraordinary new entry in Hideo Kojima's idiosyncratic series of spy thrillers, the answer would seem to be all of the above. Few games have ever ranged so far and wide in tone or style. Few have ever been so obsessed with realistic minutiae or so lofty in their ideals, yet so happy to unsuspend disbelief for the sake of a surreal non sequitur or saucy visual gag. This is an experience that verges on the schizophrenic.

Metal Gear's mix of staccato stealth action and grandiose, long-winded cinematic drama has always been an acquired taste, albeit one acquired by millions. Let's be clear from the outset: *Snake Eater* will not make any new converts. The first few hours of a certain (and certainly familiar-looking) Naked Snake's Cold War mission to rescue a defecting Soviet scientist are smothered in drawn-out cut-scenes and codec chatter to the point of suffocation. The most interesting and exciting moments refuse the player admission, and there is barely enough space in the interactive cracks between them to get a feel for the extensive changes wrought by the game's jungle setting and survivalist manifesto: camouflage, hunting, eating and auto-surgery. And these, too, can be quite alienating, slowing the pace of action and progress even further, and requiring plenty of menu-dipping.



That's unfortunate, because the frustratingly stern realworld stipulations of this template are the seed of a remarkably involving, satisfying and fresh experience. Provided he eats, and tends to more serious wounds with medical supplies, Snake's health will recover (Kojima and Bungie both wish to wipe the health pack from our screens, it seems); but if his stamina dips low, he becomes sloppy, emits telltale stomach rumbles, and his aim falters. So you must collect and hunt for food, suspiciously trying out new eats for taste and effect. Sustaining yourself through a mission this way, or noticing exhaustion set in during a silent sneak or frantic battle, more than doubles the immersion, tension and sense of adventure the game provides.



Snake Eater's character art is simply exceptional, gingerly treading the finest of lines between realism and comic-book fantasy. The quality of the motion capture in cut-scenes – and, by extension, the physical acting that it was captured from – has to be seen to be believed



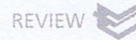
Sustaining yourself, or noticing exhaustion set in during a silent sneak or frantic battle, doubles the immersion, tension and sense of adventure

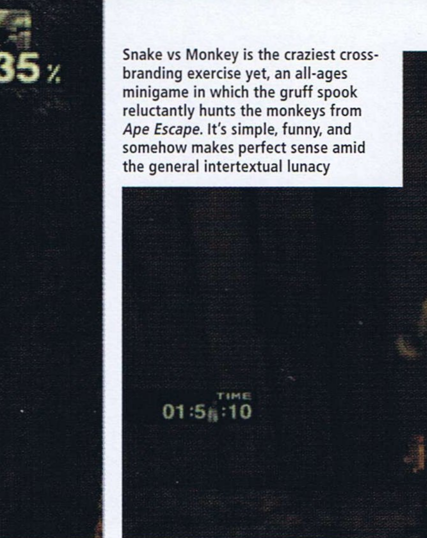
The same is true of the astonishingly atmospheric jungle and swampland. Represented in a moody, near-monochrome palette and with the hoots and rustles of a brilliant surround soundscape, necessarily teeming with edible life, it's the key component of what must be the most technically and artistically refined audiovisual experience on PS2 to date. Peering into the murky tangle to find your mark ramps up the challenge, while laying, camouflaged, in short grass inches away from a patrolling enemy is a gripping twist on stealth. The terrain opens up many new tactical options, although setting up unarmed kills or knockouts proves to be difficult, and it's all too easy to fall back on sniping at every opportunity.

Unfortunately, *Snake Eater*'s riveting spell is almost constantly broken. Don't think too hard about the fact that you can stop to eat

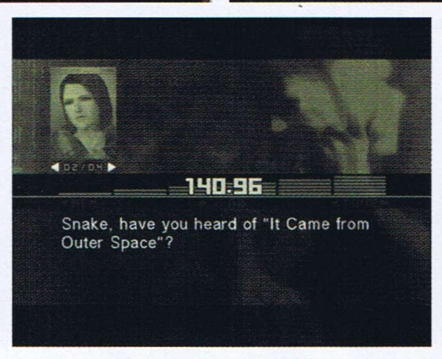


Although patrolling guards will stretch your senses to breaking point, you can't ever afford to become oblivious to your environment. Crocodiles are almost invisible underwater, until they launch an attack

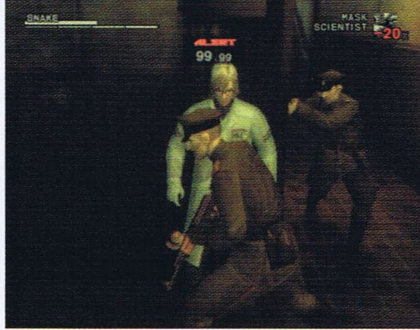


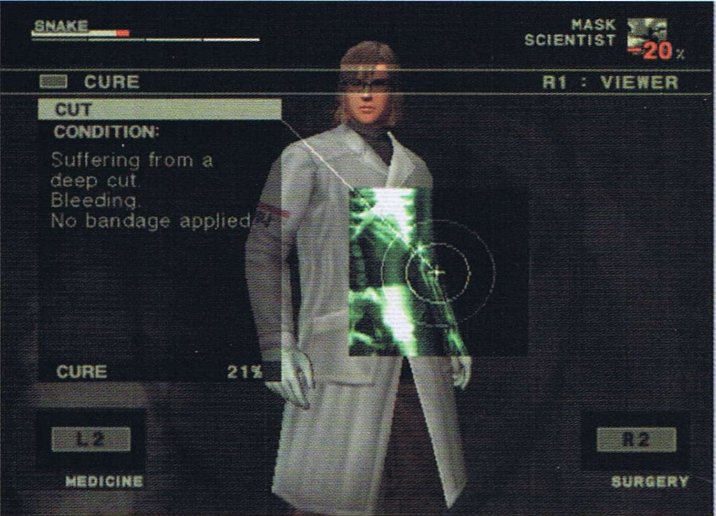


Snake vs Monkey is the craziest cross-branding exercise yet, an all-ages minigame in which the gruff spook reluctantly hunts the monkeys from *Ape Escape*. It's simple, funny, and somehow makes perfect sense amid the general intertextual lunacy



Every time you save, Para-medic (this year's love interest) offers a lecture on the cinema of the day, from Godzilla to Dr Strangelove. It's an indulgent but endearing namecheck of influences, but the codec is still clumsy and wearisome





Unsurprisingly, the interface and frontend boast peerlessly classy graphic design, especially the cure screen. Item and weapon-selection system has never been bettered, but you'll need to deal with more inventory management, and shortcuts for camouflage and food, than would have been appreciated

or change clothes mid-gunfight. Try not to notice the way slain prey dissolves into floating item boxes, or Snake's occasionally clumsy interaction with an organic world that doesn't fit the right-angled, laser-like precision of VR training. Don't get too irritated at the inflexible dichotomy between firstperson view and the traditionalist, narrow top-down camera. Really, don't, because it's this anomalous tension between real life and videogames, historical fact and wild fiction, that sparks so much of the self-referential joy and loving invention present in *Snake Eater*. It's what makes possible the utterly insane level of detail and quantity of Easter eggs, intricacies, jokes, permutations and unexpected consequences that will have fans returning to the game time and time again. Once cut-scenes loosen their stranglehold a little and set-pieces seep into actual playtime, *Snake Eater* is constantly surprising and delightful, and you'll want to see the operatic storyline all the way through to its stunning conclusion.

There's something curiously old-fashioned about it all – and that's not a reference to the immaculate 1960s period detail, which is in fact a very refreshing milieu for a videogame. No, it's that *Snake Eater* is an nth-degree extrapolation of a formula that was daring and profoundly influential back in 1998, but has long since been overtaken by events. Where the likes of *Halo*, *Riddick* and *Prince Of Persia* seek to strip away the accumulated clutter and arcane syntax of videogames, *Snake Eater* elaborates on them; where other titles aim to envelop you in a live-action blend of spectacle, storytelling and gameplay, *Snake Eater* keeps these segregated, and you at an ironic distance. It's not just the retro-tech on display here that smacks of yesterday's future.

Perhaps, though, we should be grateful for Kojima's stubborn pursuit of his quixotic, outmoded (and very Japanese) ideal. He may be tilting at windmills, but if nothing else it's a personal vision that's been realised in fully loaded, big-budget blockbuster glory down to the tiniest detail – and that's a rare enough thing in cinema, never mind videogames. Ultimately, *Snake Eater* is so much more than it could have been. It's the most loveable, exasperating, unhinged, pretentious, ambitious, gorgeous, funny, tedious, thrilling, subversive and just plain silly *Metal Gear* yet. It's the most *Metal Gear Metal Gear* yet, a franchise turned in on itself, a snake eating its own tail. It's perversely wonderful. **[8]**



Crawling into long grass toggles you automatically into firstperson mode, perfect for keeping tabs on the movement of enemies. You won't be spotted, even at close quarters, so long as your camoflague matches the foliage that surrounds you

Film '64

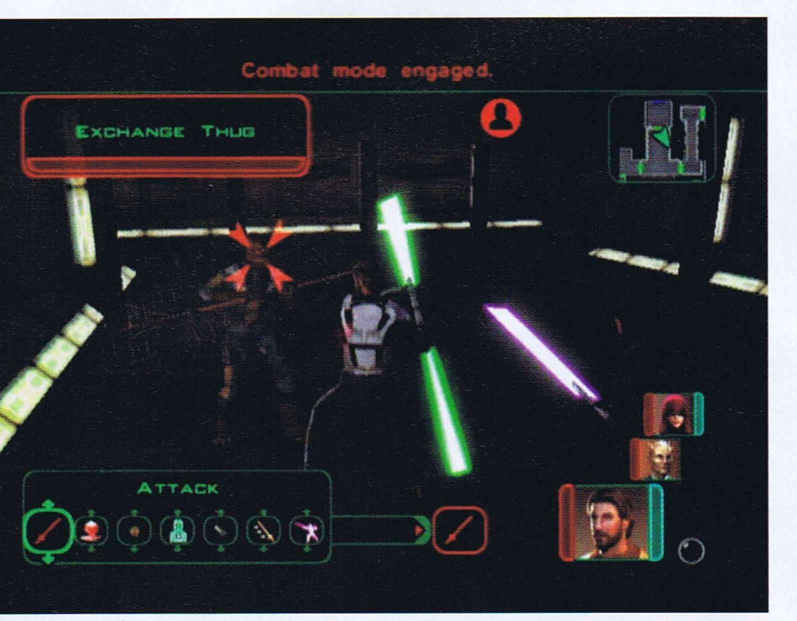


Since so much of *Metal Gear*'s substance is movie, it begs to be reviewed as such. Action is flamboyantly directed and crisply edited. It's visually exciting and evocative, beautifully shot, and makes good use of archive film and hand-drawn segments. But the script ranges from awkward to awful, cute laughs and nice character work far outweighed by graceless exposition and weak, leaden sermonising on war and peace. And the acting is worse. David Hayter's performance as Snake is execrable, an unmodulated, mechanical growl which crushes the humour, pathos and sometimes the plain sense out of every line he stumbles across. Worst during the interminable codec conversations, *Snake Eater*'s speech is not up to the standard of other games, let alone cinema, let alone cheap TV. In fact, it's embarrassing.



KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

FORMAT: XBOX, PC **PRICE:** $99.95 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT **DEVELOPER:** OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT
PREVIOUSLY IN: E1

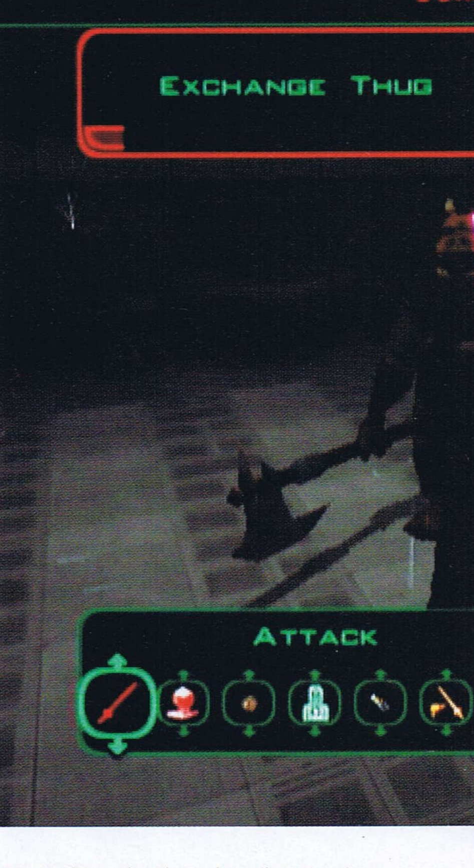






New lab benches allow you to break down some items to create others. It sounds like a gimmick but it's handy if you need a couple of computer spikes to hack into a terminal





A lot of people hated with a passion BioWare's original *KOTOR*. The heavy number crunching, turn-based combat and cascading narrative was a turn-off to console gamers more familiar with Square's brand of linear press-X-at-every-encounter RPGing. To others, us included, *KOTOR*'s failure to disguise its PC heritage was a boon. Fortunately, Obsidian has not radically altered the formula, and *KOTOR II* is as deep and multifaceted as the original.

Set five years after Malak and Revan's cataclysmic battle, the player takes on the role of a warrior cast out of the Jedi order by its council members. We're not about to give away major plot spoilers but discovering why the decision was made and uncovering events from the past is clearly the game's central narrative thrust. The plot is not as confidently handled or as revelatory as the original's, but provides ample scope for turning to the light or dark side of the Force.

Sequels always bring with them new bells and whistles, and *KOTOR II* is no different. There are some 60 new Force powers, ten character slots, the ability to go on solo missions, a new influence dynamic, improved environment effects, refined menus, better character animations, larger levels and battles with a greater number of characters on screen. And yet none of these additions address flaws evident in the original. In many ways, in fact, they serve to highlight them.

Criticising a game for long loading times may be obvious, but in *KOTOR II* so much of the plotting, exploration and puzzle solving is interspersed by countless static screens that it can't be overlooked. They dogged BioWare's effort, but here some atrocious level design by Obsidian is hard to forgive. Take Citadel Station, an orbiting space dock around Telos comprising of four separate segments. For over an hour – nearer two if you perform the sub-missions – you're asked to go back and forth between floors acting as little more than a messenger boy. There's barely even any combat to break up the toilsome to-ing and fro-ing. Other areas fare better, but the pacing and balance between combat and chatting is not nearly as well judged.

There's also a roughness that smacks of a team determined to add more content without addressing any remaining issues with the Odyssey engine. Cut-scenes jerk unceremoniously into life with little warning, characters occasionally teleport ten paces ahead (no, not via a Force power), and entering into a dialogue can sometimes provoke strange running-on-the-spot behaviour from the main protagonist. It all detracts from your involvement in the world.



> Despite a couple of convoluted plot strands, the narrative has a drive and a dual-layered depth that makes your typical videogame plots seem trite

Main criticisms out of the way, *KOTOR II* still emerges as a fine example of a western-engineered RPG. Its character and item levelling-up pleasures are many, and despite a couple of convoluted plot strands (a Jedi hiding on every planet indeed) the narrative has a drive and a dual-layered depth that makes your typical save-the-world-from-evil videogame plots seem trite. The opportunity to tread the dark or light side of the Force is just as compulsive and, crucially, you never feel as if it's fudged. Play through a second time and you can see your adventure taking a new direction as subplots open up.

Your influence also extends to subtly altering the views and alignments of those in your party. It's an optional extra but one that does pay dividends if you're the type that







More enemies can now attack your party, but things can get clogged up. Often you'll have to cancel an attack then run around the scrum to find a vulnerable opponent



enjoys manipulating characters along with the numbers in your weapon slots. Talk to your diverse (and frankly unbelievable) assortment of crew members for long enough and you can trigger bonus events and revelations along the journey.

Yet structurally the game is too similar to the original, with players choosing from one of several planets to visit after a compulsory opening section. The sense of déjà vu is overpowering and a more interesting tiered structure might be more effective next time around. Some tasks and missions also feel hackneyed, and the Ebon Hawk requiring repairs before it can leave is a theme more familiar than body horror in a Cronenberg flick. As clumsy as some elements feel, it's still difficult to vilify *KOTOR II*. Its strength is in its ability to make you care about your character's fate, and as an RPG package it's as comprehensive as they come. Pazaak is brilliant, the swoop racing patchy but diverting, and the number of subplots mesmerising. It is, however, difficult to know where LucasArts can go with the next game – if it does decide on a trilogy. Repairs to the engine are necessary, and the structure of a character fulfilling their destiny down the light or dark path has surely been exhausted. A fresh take is definitely required. **[7]**

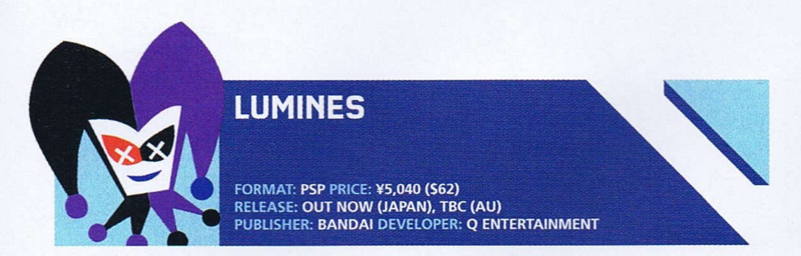


Swoop racing returns, offering a sound method of making extra cash. A jump command, some track undulations and new obstacles have been added but it's still no *Wipeout*

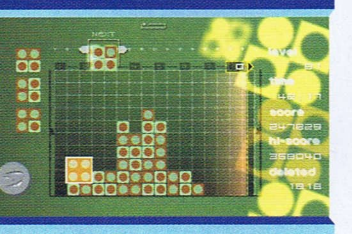
Sprint relief



As you might imagine, there's a lot of ferrying of objects and information between NPCs as well as exploration in *KOTOR II*, and it can be very time consuming. It's pleasing to find that some of this can be, if not avoided, at least reduced by the use of the Force Speed ability. When triggered, movement and combat actions are accelerated allowing you to blur through environments and get to places in double-quick time. Problem is, heavy armour prevents its use, so you have to take it off to get anywhere quickly. It's possible to cover yourself up with modest apparel, but the constant shifting in and out of menus for a change of clothes gets tiresome, leaving you running around in very little for much of the game.



World records



***Lumines*' soundtrack constantly reinvents itself like it's the last mix tape on earth: while dance music features prominently, it regularly segues into unexpected genres. Licensed tracks feature Mondo Grosso's acid jazz and fresh diva Eri Nobuchika, whose Lights provides the final skin. Early attempts to reach it may convince you that you'd have better luck buying the single.**

Puzzle games accompanying a handheld's launch are seldom the most outwardly alluring of titles, but *Lumines* was the exception to end all rules: the only completely original PSP launch title, the first post-UGA offering from Tetsuya Mizuguchi, and an obvious continuation of the producer's mission to turn the transfer of ideas between games, music and art into less of a one-way exchange.

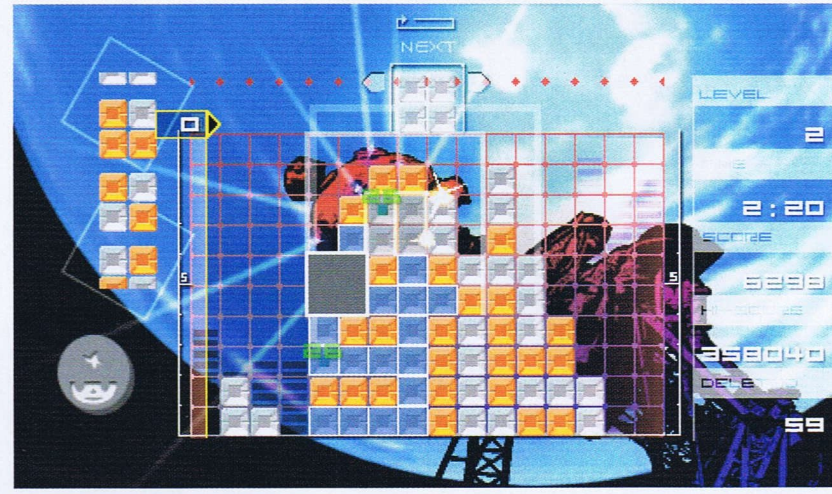
As ever, the basic mechanic is simple. Two-colour 4x4 blocks drop into a widescreen playfield, and must be rotated or arranged to form solid slabs of colour. Rather than being removed instantly, matched blocks wait until a 'timeline' sweeps across, giving a moment to either grow the combo before the line hits, or to use it as temporary scaffolding to prop up new combos formed above it.

While this dynamic is unchanging, other than by accelerated drop speed, the visuals and audio are endlessly mercurial, progressing through a series of 'skins' with complete, often wildly inventive changes in graphic design and soundtrack. Each action has a corresponding skin-specific sound to accompany the backing track, itself advanced through clearing blocks – with longer chains triggering additional effects. At first overwhelmingly hypnotic, second impressions may be that it's more sleep-inducing, too simple to challenge more austere puzzlers on any level other than beauty.

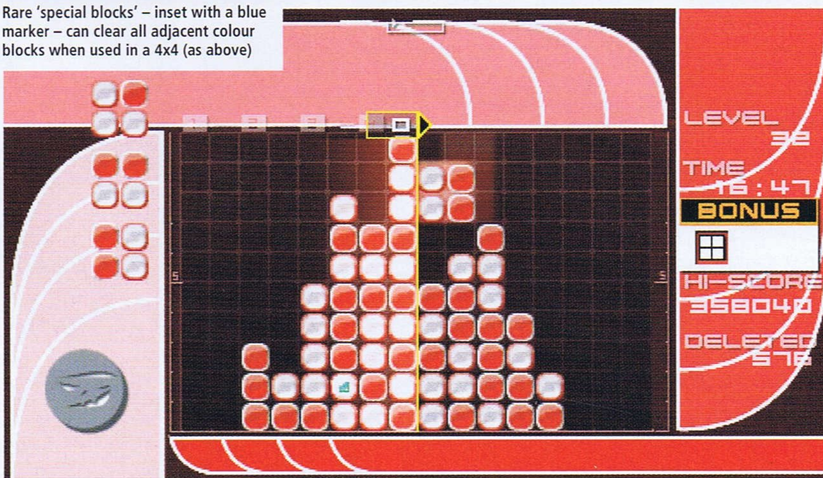
But half of the puzzle with *Lumines* is letting it prove you wrong, and it's outside of the main game that all the pieces are waiting to be assembled. The Puzzle mode's shape-building reveals the patterns possible with basic blocks and how to arrange them without premature disintegration; the merciless speed of twoplayer matches promotes the importance of speed-clearing; Time Attack success hinges on engineering the longest chains with the briefest preparation; and playing single-skin games allows you to learn the tempo of each timeline to pace yourself ahead of it.

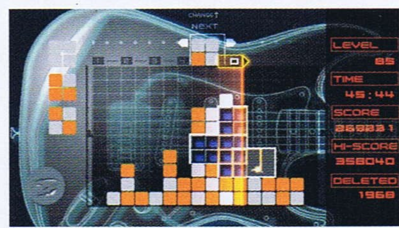
Returning to the game illuminated with these possibilities for strategy only strengthens *Lumines*' presentation, making it clear that it's your soundscape and light show, not the game's cover story. The sense of immersion can be broken by playing too intently for score – hold too long on setting up a chain combo and the current soundtrack layer loops like a skipping record – and is regularly interrupted when skins switch in jarring silence, but the experience invites surrender again just as quickly.

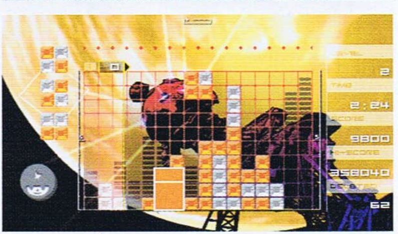
Minor lapses in cohesion and polish drop *Lumines* short of the absolute completeness of *Rez*, but it expands upon its concepts in ways even Mizuguchi followers couldn't have expected. It's a block puzzle that celebrates the joy of light and sound – to the question of whether the PSP can encourage new experiences, it's a resounding 'yes'. **[8]**



Rare 'special blocks' – inset with a blue marker – can clear all adjacent colour blocks when used in a 4x4 (as above)







The timeline's speed is relative to the current skin's soundtrack. While the slower tracks allow you the time to set long chains, the danger is that you can overfill with matched blocks before the next sweep clears them



Twoplayer mode is a typical tug-of-war for playfield space. Victory over CPU players earns their skins and avatars







The equipment grid in the top right of your screen adds an extra layer of depth to the game. Equipped items can cause status boosts or drops to other items placed adjacent to them. Planning a perfect pattern can give you a substantial advantage – assuming the right cards come up



METAL GEAR ACID

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥4,800 ($60)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (AU)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E3

The trademark exclamations still govern a large aspect of the gameplay. Some cards let you cancel alerts, so long as you're not in plain sight

There's something schizophrenic about the *Metal Gear* series. Notorious for the grandiose scale of Kojima's cinematic ambition, it's often overlooked that at its core it is profoundly abstract. The rigidity of its rules, and the discrete, regimented way your actions are divided up around them (wait, move, shoot, listen, watch) means that you could strip away all the realistic window-dressing and still have a game that made sense. It's the reason why the VR missions always worked so well, and it's the reason why a *Metal Gear* card battle game isn't as ridiculous as it sounds.

Almost every element of *Acid* is familiar. Armed with his SOCOM and his cardboard box, Snake stalks the gantries and guard huts of an enemy installation. Dodging metal detectors and security cameras, he lures soldiers to a swift and silenced death. All this action, however, is controlled through your deck of cards, and the complex world is made up of a strict and simple grid. Made up of weapons, rations, stat-boosts and the like, Snake has the option of using a card, or converting it (in most cases) into motion points. Using two or three cards per turn, you have the option of eking out a mini strategic set-piece each move, before waiting patiently (or fast-forwarding impatiently) as the enemies play out their hands.

Starting very simply, the game rapidly progresses in scale and complexity, revealing subtleties in the system not immediately apparent, such as using stealth camouflage, mines and explosive barrels to prepare elaborate booby traps. By the time the levels become daunting in scale and *Metal Gear*'s trademark bosses make an appearance, busking it is no longer enough to get you through. In some cases it's a question of holding your nerve and carefully wrangling your cards until the ones you need come round again. In others, it's the more demoralising process of abandoning the level and reworking your deck – including this time the crucial mine-detector or chunk of C4 you missed so sorely on your last attempt.

It's this latter factor which makes *Acid*'s clumsy camera such an issue. Despite letting you twitch its angle with the analogue slider, and pull out to a top-down view, it's often difficult to get a satisfactory view of the level – and even of Snake if in a tight corner. It makes planning your way around, so crucial in a grid-based strategy game, unnecessarily frustrating. And while the strategies you construct are based on loving and considered reduction of *Metal Gear*'s gameplay, overall *Acid* lacks the depth and completist compulsion that fuels the success of more compelling card battle games.

Despite these limitations, there's no doubting the title's importance. In refusing to let the PSP's home-console-style graphical capabilities dictate the nature of its gameplay, *Acid* is a valuable blueprint for future PSP development. If all the machine's software is thought out with this kind of freshness and clarity, its reputation as a gaming machine will thrive. **[6]**



The cut-scenes are as long as you would expect, but can be fast-forwarded with a clever button combo

Lovely Stunning Design

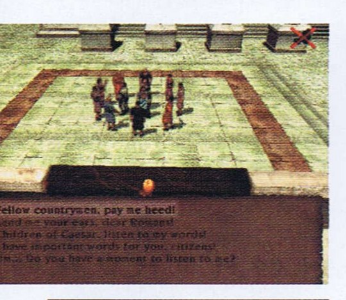


The game is visually arresting on almost every level. The technical accomplishments of the level and character design are let down a little by their mundanity – there are many, many grey corridors – but *Acid* makes up for it with a gloriously incongruous mix of ultra-modern menu design, exuberant satires on the crassness of advertising and the ethereal and unsettling art from *Zone Of The Enders*' Tsubasa Masao, through which the utterly potty story is told. Even by *Metal Gear* standards, the prospect of a future US president hijacked by Vecuronium Bromide-spraying marionettes is irresistibly preposterous.



SHADOW OF ROME

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $99.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E4



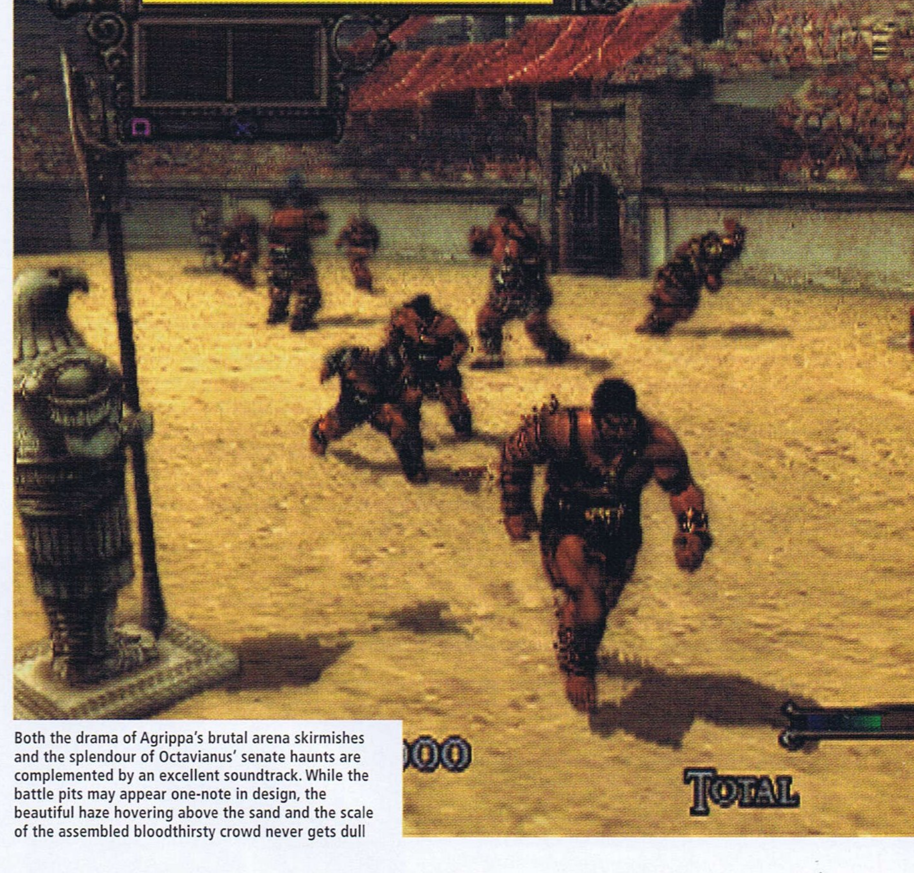


The game's map is a close relative of *Hitman*'s excellent realtime blueprint, showing the location of every character, their status and movements as well as the direction they face. Objects of interest – such as banana skins, rats and collectable coins – are also displayed

A towering brute of a man stumbles groggily, his feet shoving little dunes into the sand as he shuffles forward. His right arm – severed above the elbow – dribbles dollops of fresh arterial blood, the thick stump presenting a bone sliced so cleanly that only a halberd, or maybe a scimitar, could be the culprit. The estranged limb is nowhere to be seen, but it is in fact just a few metres away, being wielded by another man as a warm, makeshift bludgeon. It's no matter – his right hand tightly clutches a dagger, and that's enough to keep him in this fight. Until, that is, a maul – a giant mace with prickles the size of T-rex teeth – comes hurtling down on to his skull, squashing his head like a Juicy Tomato. The crowd roars. Juicy Tomato. It's one of their favourite Salvos.

OK, so such wannabe-creative writing review intros are usually reserved for WWII and Vietnam games, as writers try to stress the importance of atmosphere and setting through anecdotal example, but that sentiment actually rings true here: the scene described above is *Shadow Of Rome*'s crowning moment.

These battle arenas make up a rough half of the game, and follow the story of centurion Agrippa as he fights to get close to his imprisoned, condemned father. They brilliantly capture the glory of the gory and the sickeningly explicit violence-as-entertainment of gladiatorial combat. However, the moment *Shadow* steps away from this purity of vicious spectacle, and asks something further of the player than just crowd-pleasing murder, then it edges into far less enjoyable territory. While Agrippa is essentially the hero, the game also follows the espionage activities of wimpy Octavianus, flicking back and forth between the pair's entwined story. But it's not as simple a case of it being just a game of two halves.



Both the drama of Agrippa's brutal arena skirmishes and the splendour of Octavianus' senate haunts are complemented by an excellent soundtrack. While the battle pits may appear one-note in design, the beautiful haze hovering above the sand and the scale of the assembled bloodthirsty crowd never gets dull

hitting an opponent who's rolling around on the floor in torment after suffering an amputation. The aforementioned Juicy Tomato comes from shattering a head with a mace blow. The Meat Sculptor accolade is gained from hacking off more than one limb in a single swipe. Red Volcano is the all-too-vivid image of a combatant being chopped in half. Had enough yet? The fact that there are nearly 200 of them is testament to *Shadow*'s elaborate combat system, which features myriad weapons, attack methods, counters and scenarios. These brawls are beautifully excessive, but there's a sluggishness to the controls that is a mixed blessing, making Agrippa feel clumsy at times but adding some hefty, vicious weight to every lunge and slash.

> All the brutality and bloodthirsty excess of Caesar-era slave-pit rumbles with a refreshing lack of inhibition compared to console shooters

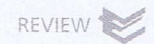
As mentioned, Agrippa's battle sections are a spectacle, capturing all the brutality and bloodthirsty excess of Caesar-era slave-pit rumbles with a refreshing lack of inhibition when compared to the supposedly 'realistic' action of bloodless, squeamish console war shooters. Thanks to the Salvos point-scoring system, there's a tongue pressed firmly in cheek, and fittingly so for something that revolves around a society so willing to wallow in the ghoulish bloodlust of mortal combat.

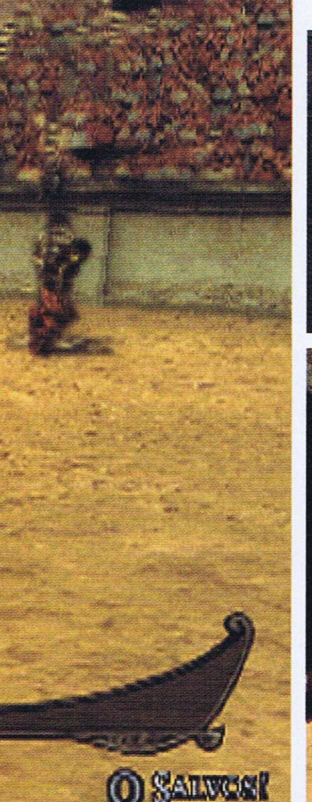
Salvos are *Shadow*'s equivalent of noteworthy attacks and combos, and are morbidly named: Urine Trouble is awarded for striking someone while they're wetting themselves. Sadist's Utopia is triggered by

The game is at its best when you're in a free-for-all rumble, and the stickiness of character movement is eclipsed by the frantic, epic nature of it all. But when Agrippa's goal is something more focused – such as having to escort a hostage, slaughtering tigers or working as part of a team to destroy the statues of an opposing team – it can easily frustrate. During survival matches against multiple foes, the fact that their blows – including whirling morning star swings and the like – harm only you is galling, as you're left to hack away gingerly at a wall of lethal assailants whose combined strength is made to feel unfair.



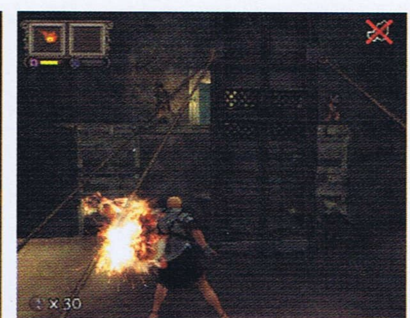
Weapons include heavy maces, bows, slings, daggers, scimitars, shields, morning stars and more, providing a dizzying number of combinations. Flaming torches can also be wielded to blind and repel whole groups of enemies, or used to ignite opponents doused in oil

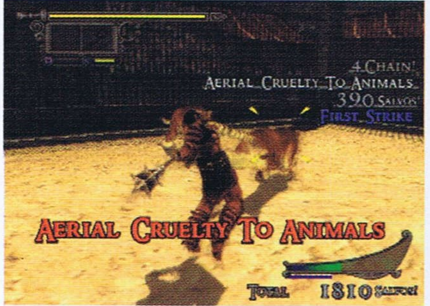










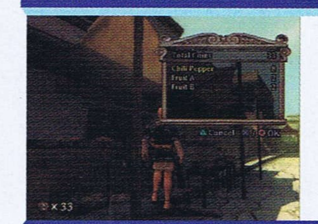


Any of Agrippa's stages cleared in the story mode can be revisited in a separate challenge mode, allowing you to cherry-pick the battles you enjoyed the most for replay. Cheats are unlocked for attaining bronze (or better) awards



Playing to the crowd will reap you extra weapons and food, depending on your popularity. Once your Salvo bar becomes completely full, a Roman Spotlight appeal will often yield a monstrous halberd, or even the invaluable Magnus sword

No place like Rome



Perhaps emphasising the difference between the characters a little too strongly, Octavianus gets to while away his spare time with some shopping. Once you've found enough silver coins, a visit to the city gates will reveal a marketplace packed with vendors eager to sell you a range of furniture and goods with which to spruce up Octavianus' room. A colourful rug? Some shiny china? A primitive dartboard? Or how about a new hairstyle? These home comforts are a suitably far cry from Agrippa's own fashion options (Mace? Dagger? Mace and dagger? Dagger and mace?), but add a laidback collection element to the game for those moments when the overkill of violence begins to jade.

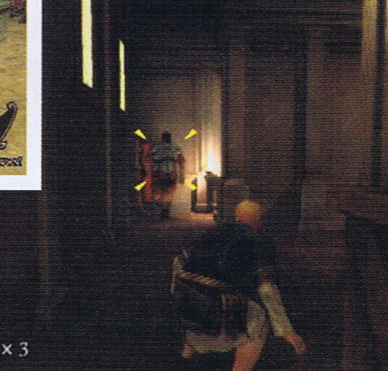
Octavianus' sections, however, are relatively free from annoyances, but they rarely feature any amount of interesting challenge. Most of these sections are lifted directly from the Big Book Of Stealth, and involve plenty of skulking, knocking guards unconscious and stealing clothes. The fact that just one hit is all it takes to slay Octavianus means there's often little room for error, and that the bulk of each scenario involves simply feeling out the lie of the land before performing the straightforward act of getting to wherever needs to be reached. It's not as bland as it sounds, and is made likeable by some quirky, if hollow, features – the slapstick of watching a guard take a comedic tumble on a well-placed banana skin, for example, or getting the chance to incite a crowd to civil disobedience by addressing them from a nearby rooftop. These stealth sections do, however, work on two levels. They forward the story in a far more meaningful manner than just another post-boss cut-scene, and they provide a gentle respite from the aggressive, relentless pressure of Agrippa's physical trials.

It's almost as if Capcom has distilled its *Onimusha* series, extracting the two core components of the franchise – epic, fierce confrontations and puzzle-pocked exploration of lavish settings – and given each more room to breathe, with their own character, style, atmosphere and pace. The result doesn't add up to anything greater than what has gone before, but a number of the individual facets – the glorious, searing frenzy of combat and the deliberate stop-start nature of play – feel greater than they ever have. *Shadow* has the same ingredients of many a game that has gone before (well, except for the Juicy Tomatoes), but it's a whole new remixed recipe for Capcom's 3D adventures. Fresher, but not better. **[7]**



Rome's equivalent of Team Capture The Flag is typical of the game's tendency to falter when pressing the player to achieve more elaborate goals. It's difficult to form any kind of strategy when your team is less capable of mobilising than your respawning opponents

Both characters can lock on to any objects and people in the vicinity, although Agrippa's errant reticule can prove to be all too eager to focus on an irrelevant item in the distance. Such problems can be simply overcome with a flick of the right analogue stick, however

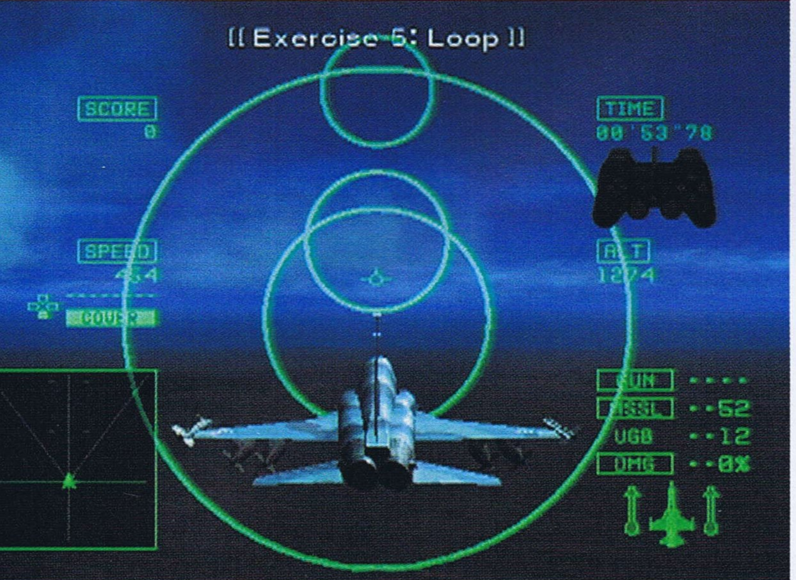




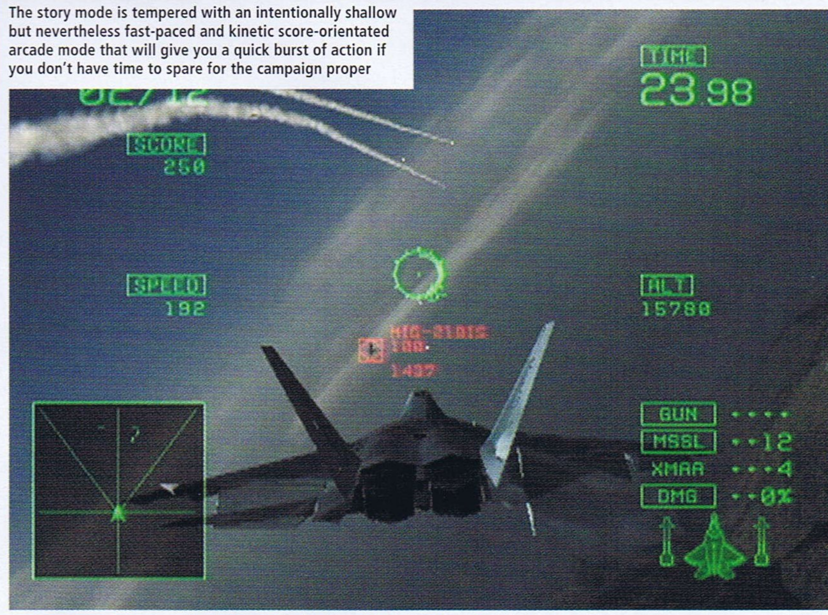
Side objectives can be unlocked during campaign missions by positively answering questions asked by one of your wingmen

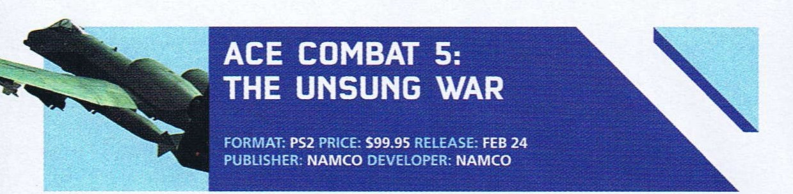


The story mode is tempered with an intentionally shallow but nevertheless fast-paced and kinetic score-orientated arcade mode that will give you a quick burst of action if you don't have time to spare for the campaign proper



San Andreas' flight school was an upward struggle undermined by landslides in difficulty; *Ace Combat 5*'s training mode is a little more forgiving, and much more detailed, teaching you every facet of the controls





ACE COMBAT 5: THE UNSUNG WAR

FORMAT: PS2 **PRICE:** $99.95 **RELEASE:** FEB 24
PUBLISHER: NAMCO **DEVELOPER:** NAMCO

Re-classified mission



Ace Combat 5 will make its way to PAL-region stores as part of one of Namco's many publishing deals with SCEE. However, the game is getting a slight tweak in order to give it a sporting chance at retail, although it's merely a cosmetic one: the subtitle will change to *Squadron Leader* and the *5* has been dropped entirely. Distancing itself from the sequential order of the series (and introducing the subtle word connection to Factor 5's first GameCube Star Wars flight sim) may persuade prospective pilots to make a purchase.

The real thrill in *Ace Combat 5* isn't when you launch a heat-seeking missile into the tail of a rival jet, nor is it when you swoop down and machine-gun the hell out of ground-based enemy forces. Although those things come close, the real joy comes from the moments when your on-board radio spurts breathless pilot chatter, conveying far more atmosphere, camaraderie and plot than any cut-scene could ever hope to. Just like before, then.

Which isn't to say that *Ace Combat 5* is particularly good at telling a story. It's not. The plotline – crucial in an adventure where the motivations behind your attacks are a key justification – at first feels like gibberish, with scenes between each mission told from the perspective of another character living in the same military base as your pilot. Though this seems confusing, once the plot *finally* starts to make sense after a handful of missions, it becomes part of its charm; look back once you're halfway through and you'll realise that being thrown headfirst into this heavy-going war between two rival nations was really the only way to make an entrance.

But even if the context is initially a little vague, the mechanic is well balanced throughout. You fly around, shoot certain things and bomb others. Each successive mission sees an incremental increase in the might, cunning or sheer scale of your enemy. This is standard game design, of course, but the *Ace Combat* series has always revelled in this structure, and the growing scope of the campaign missions in this version is excellently measured to the point of locked-on precision. It means that you willingly sign up to the next mission knowing that there will always be another tactical surprise waiting for you.

Controls are finely tuned – as you'd expect for the fifth instalment in a steadfast series – and the consistent learning curve (aided by the optional in-depth training missions) means that latter battles are punctuated with tense dogfights and challenging attack runs. The D-pad is used to issue simple controls to your three wingmen, but this works in a manner far more satisfying than recent comparable devices in the likes of *Ghost Recon 2*.

The Unsung War doesn't break any boundaries, but it perfectly fulfils expectations. What might look unambitious is in actuality an adventure that whisks you through brilliantly rendered backdrops with a touch more polish than previous iterations, always flying hard and successfully conveying the buzz of aerial combat. Dodging, weaving and cheering when a missile hits a target in the far distance: *Ace Combat 5* is comfort food in videogame form. **[7]**



This Top Gun-style camera angle is exciting and accessible, but it isn't the default mode – that's saved for the more intense, traditional firstperson view


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VIEWTIFUL JOE 2

FORMAT: GC (VERSION TESTED), PS2 PRICE: US$40
RELEASE: NOW (US), APRIL (AU) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CLOVER STUDIO


The Six Machine isn't free from Sylvia's influence, as she alters it from a missile-firing submersible to an aquatic tank

Slow down, and zoom in on those screenshots. No, you're not seeing the exact same game that added to the niche world of cel-shaded games some 18 months ago.

Viewtiful Joe 2 is a sequel that seems to have been made at Mach Speed: despite the change in specific themes and settings, the scenery looks like it was pulled straight from the exact same box of heavily pencilled, thick-cut props as the original. Joe's inertia feels unchanged, as does his repertoire of VFX-power moves – based on movie editing operations such as fast-forward, zoom and slow – which haven't been given a significant upgrade. The levels are still acts based on extremely hazardous, hyperactive movie spoofs, split up into scenes and set-pieces. The Six Machine returns to offer a shoot 'em up spin on the side-scrolling action. And there's still a sardonic voice waiting to reel off a thorny soundbite when the game is paused.

Unlike, say, *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*, however, it doesn't feel like it's given any ground for this second helping. *Viewtiful Joe 2* feels snappier and chunkier, if no more imaginative than the original, with its puzzles and encounters paced in a far more enjoyable and edible manner. It's not as tough per se, but it's just as tricky to excel and earn those rainbow ratings.

You may even have trouble noticing *VJ2*'s biggest addition in among those shots, too – Joe's girlfriend Sylvia. Despite making thrusting cheerleader poses and reeling off heart-shaped bullets, she doesn't feel as new as you'd expect from such an addition. But it's a testament to how well she's been integrated into Joe's flow more than an accusation of laziness. As well as offering gunplay – and the ranged attacks therein – Sylvia offers a Replay power in place of Mach Speed. It's actually far more limiting than it sounds, allowing you to repeat only certain attacks and actions three times over in quick succession. This is a blessing, however, as it's this limit that allows Replay to be mixed into the action as yet another layer of VFX power that feels instantly useful and comprehensible, and not some terrifyingly imposing time-flow possibility.

Puzzles based on VFX skills are abundant compared to the original, and can vary from the acute to the obtuse, from the obvious to the oblivious. The logic behind these compact conundrums is often twisted to the point that solving them feels as much like experimentation as applying deliberate thought – but it's deeply enjoyable experimentation nonetheless, and few puzzles refuse to reveal themselves long before all possibilities are exhausted. Levels feel more segmented and less regimented,




A tap of the Z button will change characters in real time, allowing for advantageous combos but leaving you open to attacks


The base characters you fight are still the same clumsy robots, but they come with some new looks and attacks. Agile ninjas, dangerous reapers and nurses' – wielding glowing syringes, naturally – brighten up the game





The Zoom function remains one of the most breathtaking in practice, but its use is essential for Ukemi and Sexy Pose moves





and the better for it. There's no cheap, wholesale reduction of difficulty, just what feels like a more balanced play experience.

The infamous, infuriating boss spats of the original still feel tricky here, but they allow for a brand new tactic: the slog. While players adept at wielding Joe and Sylvia's intense powers can carve themselves ever swifter and sleeker paths through climactic face-offs, less able players aren't punished with anything but a longer wait as they chip away with inferior, but not pointless, tactics. It's not become any easier, but it has become less punishing. For anyone heartened and spurred by the cruelty of the original, however, *VJ2* isn't short of harsh proving grounds. Quarantined into a separate section called 36 Chambers is a series of challenges that offer a chance for the dedicated to flex their VFX skills in a dedicated gymnasium, and takes deft skill as a prerequisite. Clover Studio, it seems, has answered criticisms of alienating difficulty not with compromise but with an inventive partition.

Despite sharing some remote-control powers with both Blinx and the prince of Persia, Joe can't rewind time. His (and, now, Sylvia's) game is all about moving forward, about editing yourself into a frantic, continuous take of action; *Viewtiful Joe 2* itself may not have actually moved forward in any serious manner, true, but it remains completely faithful to the delightful, colourful, ultraviolent slow-mo ballet that made the original so energetic and refreshing, while smoothing out some of the wrinkles. For newcomers, it's welcoming and charming. For returning fans, it's refined and thoughtful enough to instantly engage.

Visually, it's as playful and quirky as ever, but there's nothing as impacting or as glorious as when you first laid eyes on *Viewtiful Joe*. Still, it's a game with enduring length and depth, and controls that remain as faultless and sure-footed in practice as any game around. As a sequel, it's not so much an extension as a remix, but one so capable and confident that 'remix' could very well be one of Clover Studio's own personal VFX powers. **[8]**

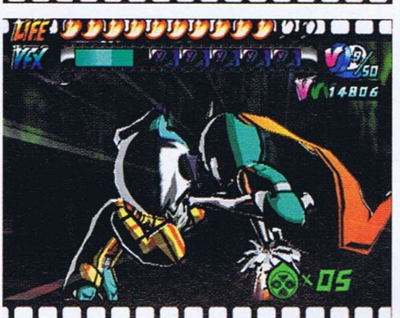


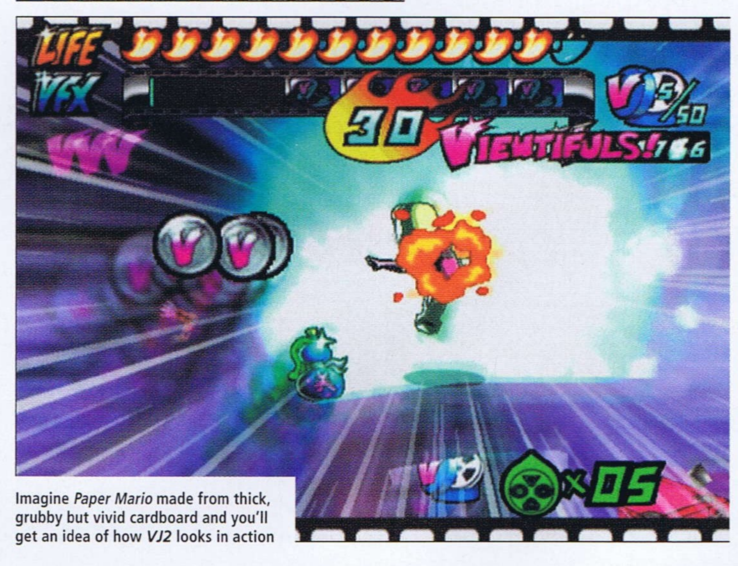
It remains completely faithful to the delightful, colourful, ultraviolent slow-mo ballet that made the original so energetic and refreshing

Sylvia's Replay power is a straightforwardly powerful move that won't baffle newcomers any. Her funky style extends to a pair of pom-poms and a gun that fires a limp extending boxing glove when VFX reserves are depleted









Imagine *Paper Mario* made from thick, grubby but vivid cardboard and you'll get an idea of how *VJ2* looks in action

Hint-man contracts



While performing well has always been rewarded with higher ratings and hardcore difficulty modes, *Viewtiful Joe 2* goes one step further – backwards, even – by giving you something when you die. An intricate hint list is available to view between stages, and each tip is unlocked depending on the section of the game that defeated you. Some of them are fluff, but a lot are genuinely insightful and provide a neat, if cruel, way of allowing the player to explore the game's finer details without recourse to a FAQ or forum. Of course, a more up-front method of hint delivery would have been preferable, but one thing's for sure: unlocking them all will be a strangely confusing feat for completists.



PROJECT RUB

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $69.95
RELEASE: FEB 24 PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (SONIC TEAM)

The last Game Developers Conference included a special Game Designer's Challenge, pitting three top designers against one another to go boldly into uncharted territory and create a game about a love story. Unbeknown to all at the time, though, halfway across the world Sega was hard at work actually doing just that. *Feel The Magic* is a retelling of the timeless boy-meets-girl, boy-joins-troupe-of-rabbit-eared-performance-artists-to-impress-girl tale, told in a pastiche of diverse minigames that have you flexing your kung-fu skills to protect your love interest from a pack of charging bulls one minute and escaping the bowels of a 50-foot serpent the next.

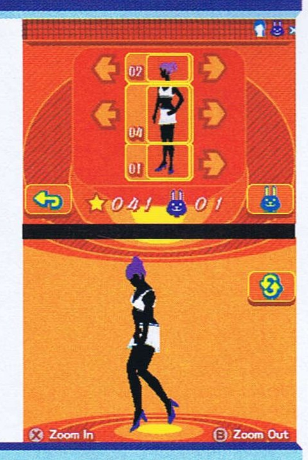
Though the Sonic Team logo is the first thing that appears upon powering up the game, from the title screen onward you'll instantly recognise the influence of the team's newest members, the merged staff of the former UGA. Director Takumi Yoshinaga and designer Taro Hino bring back all of the retro-chic style that made *Space Channel 5* memorable, and the game's limited palette and striking silhouetted character design create one of the most visually arresting titles in recent memory.

Sonic Team's underlying mission – to create a launch title to demonstrate nearly every feature with which the DS promises to revolutionise portable gaming – is undoubtedly a success. *Feel The Magic*, of all the handful of US launch games, is the best primer for the hardware's capabilities and potential, and will be the title you'll use when introducing the system to your friends.

However, for all its copious charm, it never fully seems to transcend this utilitarian purpose. The subset of games that stay focused on the love story at hand feel the most successful, almost unnervingly so. Using your fingertip to rub the girl clean, or awkwardly fumble with the buttons on her dress so she might slip it off – all while she blushes and coos back in satisfaction – is a truly unparalleled experience. Other minigames, though, feel slapdash and awkwardly out of context. Sometimes a tech demo truly is just a tech demo, no matter how skimpily you dress it, even if it is as genuinely mesmerising as blowing on the screen to send a sailing boat out to sea.

The minigames completed in Story mode can be played on their own, most at an increasing rate of difficulty. Clearing these earns stars, which, in conjunction with rabbit tokens hidden in story mode cut-scenes, unlock new outfits for the girl. Neither these extenders nor the undeniable charms of the meat of the game can ultimately save *Project Rub* from its own brevity. It's doubtful you'll endlessly return past the few hours necessary to beat the game, but for now it remains both a welcome introduction to a new system and its own unique and rewarding experience. **[6]**

Unleash the Maniac

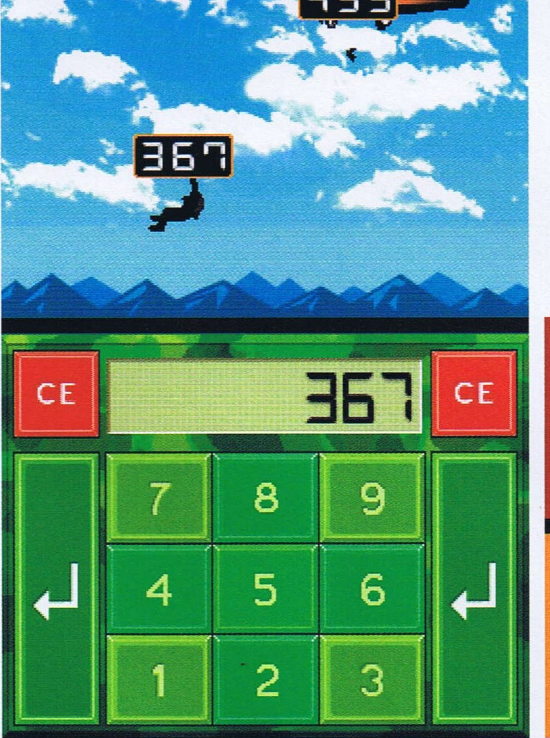


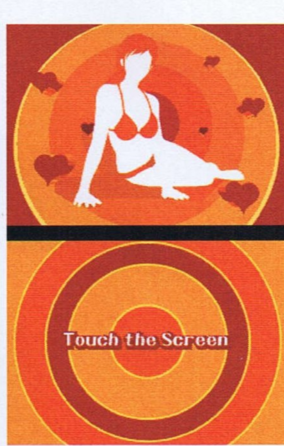
Most potentially disturbing is the game's aptly titled Maniac mode, where players can see the fruits of their outfit-unlocking labour, modelled in full rotating and zoomable 3D. Once an outfit is chosen, the two displays can be swapped so the player might, well, manipulate the girl by touching her wherever he might choose. Secret outfits for this mode can be unlocked by playing the game with select Sonic Team GBA titles inserted in the DS's relevant slot. As a result, rejoice, the heretofore impossible is now possible – hardcore Sega fans can dress up a girl as NiGHTS and touch her inappropriately to their hearts' content.



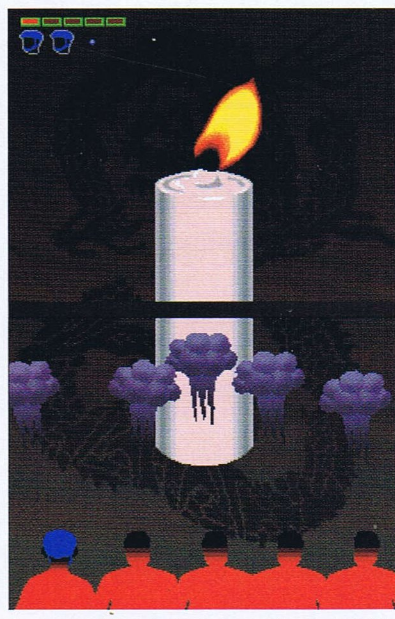


Feel The Magic, internally known as Project RUB, plays like one big Japanese pun, from 'rub', as the method of screen manipulation, to its Japanese synonym and the game's main theme of love (ra-bu), and from the repeated spoken command 'rub it!' to 'rabbit' – the outfits donned by the performance art troupe





In a nod toward Sega's own *Typing Of The Dead*, one of *Feel The Magic*'s minigames pits players against their own number pad skills as they desperately punch in strings of digits on the touchscreen before paratroopers above drop to their doom



An example of the game's more contextless content, this minigame features a giant candle breaking through a dimensional rift in the space-time continuum, which the player must then attempt to blow out as it marches ever closer. It's certainly wacky, but rather awkwardly placed



VAMPIRE CHRONICLE: THE CHAOS TOWER

FORMAT: PSP **PRICE:** ¥5,040 ($62)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (AU) **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

The *Street Fighter* series has recently received an anniversary feting on the PS2, but it's that fighter's supernatural twin that gets the spotlight of Capcom's first PSP toe-dip. If *Vampire* (*Darkstalkers* to western arcades) may be a tournament-play featherweight compared to the *SF* line, it punches far above its weight in terms of art direction – reason enough to be interested in seeing its oft-plundered characters presented in the far more flattering light of the PSP's screen.

Unfortunately, what could have been a comprehensive, if latecoming, introduction to the series for new players is slightly spoiled by a lack of guidance. Though the ability to mix overall game rules and individual character modifications from across the *Vampire* games will be a playground for series devotees, those unfamiliar with the nuances of these changes face a Go Directly To GameFAQs mentality at odds with the freshness of the format.

Completists, too, may be disappointed to find that, as a port from a Dreamcast special edition of *Vampire Saviour/Darkstalkers 3* rather than a custom-built collection, it's a chronicle with some hefty tracts of history missing – such as the first two games. The Arcade mode only offers the *Saviour* cycle, regardless of your selected character's chosen game and style; the original memorable stage backgrounds, too, are entirely absent. While clearing the Arcade mode will unlock the historically correct ending sequences, it's bemusing to view the aftermath of battles you can't play.

The game's PSP-exclusive addition, the Tower mode, pits your chosen team of three characters against a series of one-round survival bouts. Life bars carry over to the next fight, and a downed character is out for good, so careful sizing up of opponents is required as enemy AI becomes steadily bolder (and more liable to play cheap with special moves). Successes in the Tower fights unlock an expansive illustration gallery, but the mode feels undernourished in comparison to the character-building offering from the PS1 *Saviour EX/Darkstalkers 3* port: a combination of the two could have greatly increased the Tower's appeal.

Even if the overall package is less than the sum of its parts, an arcade-perfect port of *Vampire Saviour* is impressive enough alone, and the PSP's screen definition infuses the visuals with their original, unmistakable vibrancy. As an object lesson in the viability of high-quality 2D on the console, its success is only tempered by the sense that it's a token offering rather than a throwing down of the gauntlet on a new platform. *Vampire* deserved this restoration, but more than that it needs new blood. **[6]**





New visual elements (above and bottom of page) are scrappy in comparison to the original style



Full widescreen (left) is impressive, though it stretches and blurs the graphics to fit. A pixel-perfect bordered option is also available



MR DRILLER DRILL SPIRITS

FORMAT: DS **PRICE:** ¥4,800 ($60)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US/JP), TBA (AU) **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Since its inception over four years ago, the *Mr Driller* series has seen a dramatic evolution. What began as a reed-thin quick-fix arcade game has accumulated new characters, multiplayer games, and a raft of innovative singleplayer puzzle modes. Unfortunately, nearly all the sequels featuring these additions have remained in the east – most criminally 2003's *Drill Land* – leaving most westerners wondering what some importers were so worked up about.

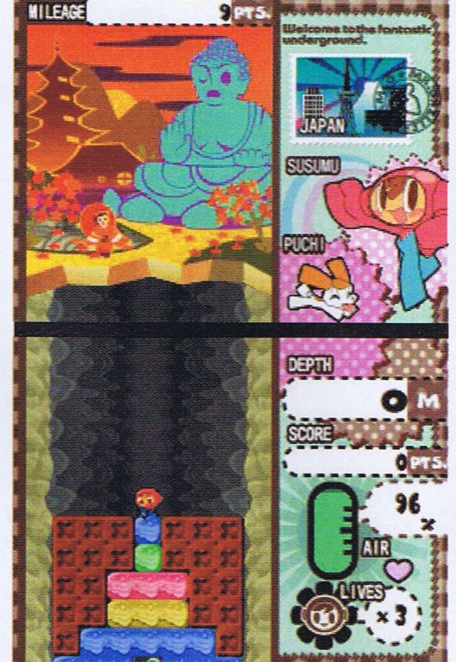
Drill Spirits delivers a competent but not outstanding selection of these innovations. Players familiar with *Mr Driller 2* will recognise the Mission Driller and Time Attack modes, but DriStone mode, a new series staple, is less frantic and more calculative – each drill costs one point of oxygen (versus having oxygen steadily deplete), so wanton thoughtless racing downward leads to a quick death. Hidden within the blocks, however, are DriStones, power-ups that can variously increase oxygen, destroy all blocks of a certain colour and so on, essential for making the longest hauls to your goal. This subtle gameplay change transforms each round into a carefully plotted excavation, and singlehandedly adds considerable depth to the title.

Pressure Mode adds a giant Destroyer Drill constantly bearing down upon you from above, which must be destroyed by collecting and firing power capsules back up the well as you hurriedly descend downward. It's a welcome addition, but lacks the finesse of the singleplayer variations the series has previously provided, and reads more as a simple attempt at creating a game element that occupies the DS's upper screen.

Drill Spirits makes other lacklustre attempts to utilise the DS's features. The stylus can be tapped to drill in any direction, but in high-stress situations the imprecision is often disastrous. Some menus are touch controlled, while others, like the in-game pause menu, require button presses.

Importers should also note that, due to time constraints, both single-cart multiplayer and the DriStone mode were removed from the US version. *Drill Spirits* is a well-rounded introduction to the series, but falls far short of its greatest successes. **[6]**

The overall portrait presentation of the DS's dual screens is the perfect fit for *Mr Driller*'s mineshaft mechanics. Seeing your route down the level stretch up above you is an impressive sight







Mr Driller was always a stressful game – its candy colours belying the threat of crushing suffocation. The Destroyer Drill only increases the pressure

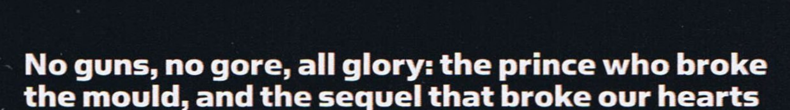

Prince of Persia
The Sands of Time



PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

FORMAT: **GC, PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**





No guns, no gore, all glory: the prince who broke the mould, and the sequel that broke our hearts

The dagger plunges into the cold blaze of the glinting sand and you have a moment to breathe. A moment to sense the shapes of all the things you won't have time to think about: the consequences of what you've done and the consequences of what you haven't; the price of what you've lost and the price of what you're yet to find; the things you've changed and the things that won't change back. Before the shapes have time to form it starts, pulling you back past every shout of wonder, every splash of sudden sand, every breathless ache of victory: faster, faster, faster. And then the world is as it was, cool and quiet as raindrops, and you can take another breath. But by the time it leaves your lungs it has begun again – the same midnight race, the same moon-bleached balcony. A different prince. A different you.

It's the hallmark of every good videogame – the urge to go back to the beginning as soon as you get to the end. *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* goes one better: it restarts the story for you as soon as it reaches its climax. It's not a complicated tale – the prince, driven by his greed for glory, is tricked by a scheming vizier into unleashing the Sands of Time, which kill everything they touch. They can't be stopped, only contained, so the game charts his mission to turn their power against them and rewind time to a point before his fatal mistake. It's hardly a spoiler to say that he succeeds, and when he does, the game plays it straight. You return to the opening scene of the game, and no one but the prince knows what so nearly happened next. All that remains is to take steps to safeguard the Sands, and the prince can sleep easy. Simple.

So simple that it's easy to overlook how beautifully you've been tricked. The game is transparently honest with you from its very first moments. The prince slips from a moonlit balcony into the warm glow of a bedroom. We see a woman sleeping, hear her gasp. "You may wonder who I am," says the prince, silencing her. "Sit down, and I will tell you a tale like none which you have ever heard." What could be plainer? But gamers have been trained for years to mistrust cut-scenes; what gamers trust is action. And so, once they gain control of the prince, the bedroom and the tale-telling is dismissed or forgotten. Shrugged off as a hackneyed narrative device for setting the game's fantastical scene.

> **The better the game and the purer the connection between the player and the action, then the greater the sense of nowness. We even call it 'immediacy'**

Games don't handle time very well – saves and deaths, reloads and pauses see to that. What games communicate convincingly is the now. The better the game and the purer the connection between the player and the action, then the greater the sense of nowness. We even call it 'immediacy', complimenting the game on its ability to replace the passage of time with an eternal, continual present. So even if a game tells you to your face that this action which feels so urgent, this danger which feels so pressing, is actually all done and dusted, something which the participants have converted into anecdote, it's still hard to adjust. Even



TALKING FIGHT

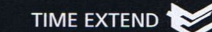
Of those that didn't enjoy *The Sands Of Time*, the most numerous were those who hated the combat. A poorly judged difficultly spike during the battle against your sand-infected father meant many people abandonded the title, never to return. Throughout the game, fights were far too drawn-out, respawning enemies allowing you no way to guage your progress through the fight.

Other than this error of judgement, however, *TSOT*'s combat is masterfully simple. Enemies were discretely colour-coded – red if they could be vaulted, blue if not – and those that could were then vulnerable to a instant-kill combo that substantially speeded up the longer battles. The forgiving auto-target meant spectacular moves could be performed with ease, and the sand-guzzling Haste special attack remains astoundingly satisfying and gratifyingly effective.

the prince's asides ("Do you wish me to leave before finishing my story?" he asks, shocked at your audacity in selecting 'Quit' from the menu) just seem like cheesy conceits, window-dressing for a self-conscious story.

If you ask them now, plenty of people say they saw it coming. At the time, most weren't so prescient – their memory of the game being rewritten by nostalgia as surely as the prince rewrote his past. They were the lucky ones, for the moment of realisation waiting for them at the end of the game was like the finest unlockable ever imagined. For most of your adventure, your only companion – the only other human creature – is Farah, the princess of the kingdom your father's army has ransacked. She is haughty and suspicious, and the prince responds in kind, taunting her with an archness that seems rather overdone: "Skinny little thing, aren't you," he jibes, as she wriggles through yet another crack. Their trials bring them together, of course, though not without mishap and mistrust. Eventually, they consummate their attraction in a sumptuous bathhouse, choked with steam and scent. They are threatened, rescued, separated, reunited. And then Farah dies. The prince, who has used his control over time to rewind himself from countless gruesome deaths, stands helpless over her crumpled corpse.

The *Prince Of Persia* series has always done flesh and bone very well. The excellence of the animation, the fluidity of the motion makes its characters human in a way few games







The prince's sand-collecting finishing move is a fine example of the subtle balance that was built into the game's combat. Dazzlingly pretty, it also allowed the camera to perform some of its more spectacular showboating

achieve. In *TSOT*, this physicality extends to give Farah and the prince a tangible sexuality. You may have seen nothing more than a hint, but the game has made it plain that these are people who have loved each other, emotionally and physically. Now one lies dead at the feet of the other. But the prince is a hero, and a greater wrong must be righted than the death of his lover. And so the prince, battered and bereaved, stabs his dagger into the cold heart of the sands and in a moment, everything that is, wasn't.

Scenes from his adventure flash before you as you rewind to the beginning, but this full circle doesn't signal an ending. The evil vizier must be executed, the Dagger of Time protected. And so the prince sets off to find Farah and warn her. As he enters her bedchamber, he finds the woman he last saw dead alive, safe, asleep. But as she opens her eyes, you remember that she will not know him. "You may wonder who I am," says the prince, softly. "Sit down, and I will tell you a tale." As he says these words, your mind races back to every nuance of the story your actions have helped to tell. The teasing words which sounded so overdone all those hours ago take on a subtle charm when you realise they are being recounted direct to an indignant, uncomprehending Farah. The moments of intimacy become even more charged when you know that he's describing every touch to a woman who can't understand why this stranger seems to know her inside out. It's a beautiful and elegant trick.

This reversal is what makes you want to do some time travelling of your own, rewinding to the start of the game so you can hear the tale again, only this time with Farah's ears instead of your own.

The words won't change, and nor will your actions. The palace grounds will remain the same and identical traps will hiss down identical corridors, but the story will change because you have changed.

The real story is that TSOT should have changed the way games are made forever, and it hasn't. When it arrived, it felt like a revolution. Now, time seems to have reset

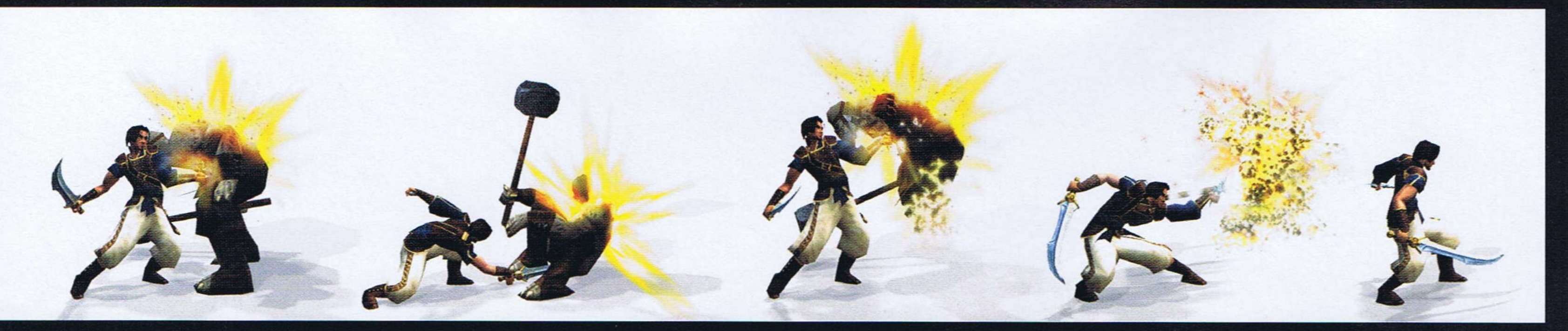
But the tale of Farah and the prince, however bewitching, isn't the real story of *TSOT*. The real story has the same shape – an extraordinary adventure that nearly changed the world, but in the end left us back where we started – but it isn't about fictional characters. The real story is that *TSOT* should have changed the way games are made forever, and it hasn't. When it arrived, it felt like a revolution. By resuscitating a stagnant genre – the 3D platformer – it formed a blueprint for how to build a future for games on the very best foundations of the last 25 years, of how to streamline and modernise everything that's precious in gaming's heritage. And yet, now, time seems to have reset. Now, it seems unlikely to have the influence it deserves, and the proof of that is evident in its sequel, *Warrior Within*.

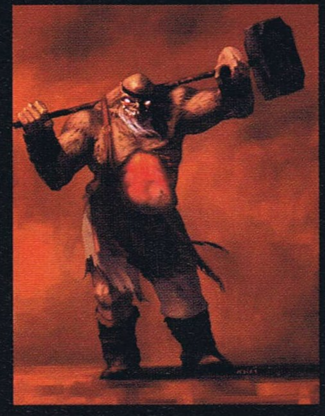
Warrior Within preserves the movement which is the core component of *TSOT*'s excellence. A year on, it's still extraordinary. Graceful, muscular, precise and forgiving, it revolutionised expectations of how liberating a 3D space could be. The whole game became a giant climbing frame, a big-top extravaganza where you got to be the star turn and the enraptured audience rolled into one. With this key feature maintained, it was fundamentally impossible for *Warrior Within* to be a bad game.



PACE MAKERS

When discussing his plans for the sequel, executive producer Yannis Mallat made clear his intention to 'fix' *TSOT*'s pacing. Feeling that the first game was too sectional – fight, then explore, then puzzle, then fight again – *Warrior Within* was designed to mix the three elements into each other. For many who loved the first game, it seems a curious decision. Mixing those elements more evenly together inevitably creates a more monotone result. In comparison, *TSOT*'s pacing shone, giving the game a pronounced dynamic. Intense settings such as the elevator fight gave you nothing to worry about except staying alive, and the dreamy tranquility of the underground reservoir focused your mind so fully on spatial puzzles that emerging back into the world of bright sunlight and violent hostility was a delicious shock.









The sand people, with a glint in their eye to match the one in their gaping, bloated bellies, make the violence feel rewardingly visceral without resorting to bloody gore



The long-range camera setting is crucial for puzzle solving, but also for appreciating the splendour

But in almost every other respect, it turned back the clock *TSOT* had pushed forward.

The Sands Of Time is an astonishingly simple game, lean and economical. A ten-hour trip, it pulled the player along a single line. Close your eyes and you can see your path through the whole game as one continuous, golden thread – looping out of windows and across courtyards, down wells and twining around traps. At a time when most games are fighting to boast about their replayability, branching narratives and ample unlockables, *TSOT* said simply: here is the game. Begin at the beginning. Fight to the end. And then you will have seen everything we have to give you, everything you paid for.

The mechanics are equally stripped down. You are a prince with a sword, and you move through a world of water and sand. Water is life and sand is death, and you'll need both to survive. There is nothing to collect, no complex armoury to complete. The rigour of the logic behind the system gives the game a cohesion which is noticeably lacking in *Warrior Within*. In *TSOT*, your enemies are infected with the Sands of Time, which it is your goal to recover. Killing them lets you collect the sand, and the more you collect, the more powerful the dagger becomes. *WW* takes the same system and twists it, losing its simplicity. Time powers mysteriously become available as you travel through the palace's portals. Enemies contain sand which you can still collect, despite no longer having a dagger to do it with. The same sand has conveniently accumulated in jars and barrels which dot the palace, forcing you into the Neanderthal game behaviour that *TSOT* had left behind – 'me need, me smash'. Bonus chests dot the audience chambers and vaulted dungeons, ready to bark out 'New Artwork Unlocked!' in the event of you ever becoming sufficiently absorbed to forget you were playing a videogame.

The contrast between the games is not accidental. *Warrior Within* set out to improve on *TSOT* and it tried to do so by listening to gamers. What gamers said was, 'Make it more like other videogames! We want to unlock things! We want combos! We want collectables!' But there's a problem with listening to gamers and it's this: the ones that shout the loudest are the smallest minority. And even if a developer could find a way to listen to every single gamer's preferences individually, they'd still only be hearing from a small sector of gaming's potential market: many more people do not play games than those who do. What *TSOT*, with its staunch purity, hazy beauty and un-videogameness offered was something for people who don't like what's already available.

> **Warrior Within set out to improve on TSOT and it tried to do so by listening to gamers. What gamers said was, 'Make it more like other videogames! We want to unlock things'**

The same process happened with the aesthetic. Both *TSOT* and *WW* are fantastic pieces of design. Imaginative and disciplined, they create worlds that are both consistent and consistently beautiful. But *WW*'s world of gloom and grit is a world we've visited before. *TSOT* was a revelation in billowing silk and creamy marble, splashed with the colours of wine and jewels. Nor is it just the world – *TSOT*'s sophisticated characters have been pulled back into the realm of videogame convention. The prince has lost his aristocratic flair and his gentle English accent. The moment in *WW* when he snarls "YOU BITCH!" is the moment he ceases to be an individual and becomes a cipher, a new skin to slip over every other identikit hero you've ever played. The females fare no better, losing Farah's womanly sensuality in a quest to sex her up with a painted-on thong and breasts like grapefruit. It's a desperately disappointing step back from the leap that *TSOT* took by demonstrating so emphatically that games can portray female (and male) sexuality in a way that isn't degrading, adolescent and ugly.

This isn't a question of aesthetic snobbery. There will be many who prefer the grittier look of *WW* to the matinee-idol excesses of *TSOT*, just as there are some who cursed and some who cheered when they heard of the involvement of Godsmack. Nor is it a criticism of the designers' intentions. However welcome more of the same would have been, *TSOT 1.5* would have been an unambitious and ultimately self-defeating project. Changing the story and evolving the prince's personality to reflect the



The dizzying heights of the birdhouse is one of the most fondly remembered locations in the game, and the place where *TSOT*'s circus inspiration is the clearest

horrors he's endured is a laudable way to approach a sequel. The frustration is that instead of moving the game forward, it moved it back. *WW* showed us a game world we already knew would work. *TSOT* showed us that games could do things we didn't know they could; it expanded the horizons, offering something genuinely different.

A year on, those horizons are shrinking back. 3D platforming is not experiencing a glorious renaissance. The industry is looking inwards, relying on men, guns, cars and crime to appease its core market. Sex remains an unmentionable taboo, with little on offer beyond Larry's leisurely knob gags and an endless parade of 'enhanced' female characters in impractical underwear. Games are becoming ever more bloated, blindly trying to satisfy the illusory demands of an audience who only finish every tenth title they buy. *TSOT*'s slow sales mean that, despite critical acclaim and continuing popularity, its innovations are considered a failed experiment: rewind, rewrite, start again. Had it stormed to Christmas number one, this year's Hype section might have looked very different. As it is, the stronger retail performance of *Warrior Within* (and the whooping 100 per cents awarded it by certain elements of the press) determines a more likely future direction for gaming: macho, bloody and moody.

It is perhaps as it should be. There is nothing inherently wrong with men, guns, cars or crime. In the last few months alone, games of true excellence have been released which create sparkling and unexpected experiences from those simple, staple ingredients. And it means *TSOT* doesn't have to suffer the indignity of a dozen clumsy clones, diluting its brilliance and fudging its simplicity. Instead, *TSOT* hangs suspended, a moment of gaming magic preserved in gleaming amber. And there it will stay forever, untouched and unspoiled, waiting for you to come and listen again. "Sit down," it says to you, softly, "for I have a tale to tell, like none which you have ever heard…"



PRINCE'S PROGRESS

The *Prince Of Persia* sales scandal was one of the juciest bits of game journalist gossip at the end of 2003. Despite widespread acclaim, the game barely made a dent in the all-formats Christmas charts, despite its quality. An exclusivity deal with Sony meant that only the PS2 version launched before Christmas, and despite advertising, Ubisoft was unable to generate much of a buzz about the game. However, it went on to perform strongly: it was almost immediately discounted on PS2 and the cheaper price, along with Xbox, PC and GC versions, pushed sales enough to reach 2.4 million by the end of April. It was an impressive comback, but one thoroughly eclipsed by the 1.8 million units *Warrior Within* sold in its first two weeks on release.





THE MAKING OF...
OUTCAST

Oddball, eccentric and celebrated as one of the PC's greatest adventure games, Outcast lived up to its name and created a minor legend

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **INFOGRAMES** DEVELOPER: **APPEAL** ORIGIN: **BELGIUM** RELEASE DATE: **1999**

Silly words are one of the hazards of science fiction, and *Outcast* is chock full of multi-syllabic names, places and giant alien ostriches. Ask a veteran of the game the first thing that they remember about it and these contrived concatenations of vowels will often come up. That *Outcast's* characters had to pronounce quite so many awkward names has become a joke among PC gamers, making you feel like a Klingon dictionary was just around the corner.

But such absurdities were just one facet of one of the most ambitious attempts to create a cogent, living and breathing world for players to explore at their leisure. Because the second thing an *Outcast* player will remember is the sheer scale and the limitless freedom the game supplied. Its many different lands, from desert to swamp to icy tundra, were utterly free to roam, but structured enough to set the player on the road of an epic quest to save both his colleagues and the entire world, as well as fixing some problems back home on Earth. Despite the fact that a black hole was eating their homeworld, players could take their time to explore this new planet and to build up a reputation among the peasants and rebel clans for whom our hero, Cutter Slade, was something of a messiah. *Outcast's* towns, villages and alien wildernesses remain one of the outstanding visions of what PC gaming could and should be like. The game took an unprecedented open-ended approach to a serious sci-fi universe, while simultaneously allowing a storyline to emerge through the player's interaction with complex AI. A rare feat indeed.

"I think it was the first game with an open-ended 3D immersive world that the player could explore at his own convenience"

One the founders and game designers from that original Appeal team was **Yves Grolet**. A veteran of the French videogame industry, having started out as a programmer for Ubisoft at the age of 19, he went on to jointly found the development house in 1995, working on *Outcast* until its release in 1999. In 2002 he launched his own company, Elsewhere Entertainment. Clearly *Outcast* was important game for Grolet personally, but why should we regard it as an important game in the greater scheme of things? "I think it was the first game with an open-ended 3D immersive world that the player could explore at his own convenience, at his own pace and in the order he



Left to right: programmers Yves Grolet and Yann Robert with *Outcast* designer Franck Sauer



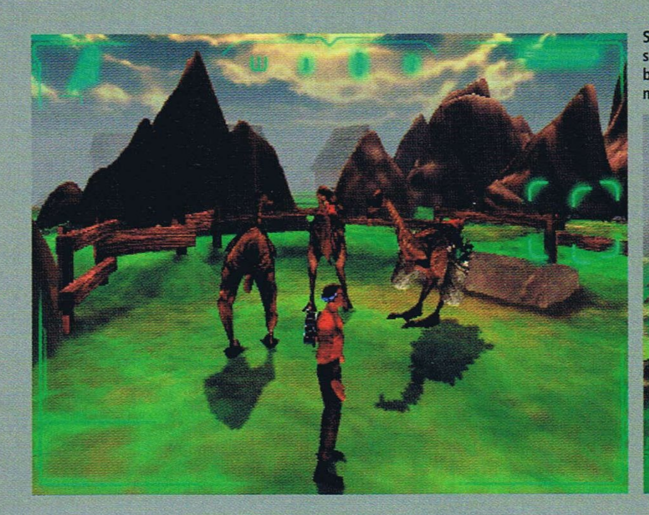


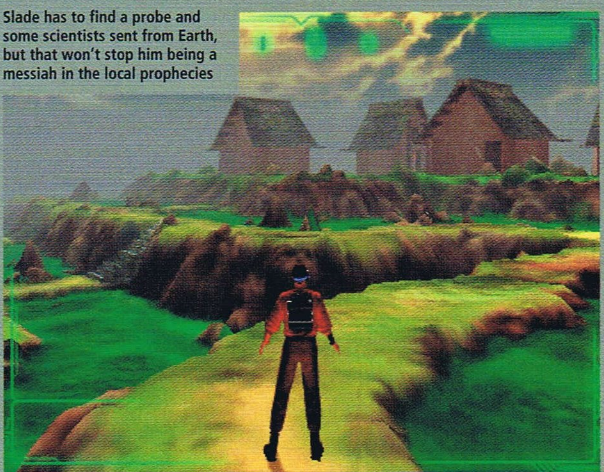
Outcast was given a lavish orchestral score by the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra. The sweeping classical strings sit rather at odds with some of the game's content



THE OUT-TAKES

Outcast **featured hours of voice acting, each and every being in the world making for a possible conversation, or even a song, should the mood take them. These mammoth recording sessions weren't without their mishaps, and the frustrations of voicing an alien world is demonstrated with colourful and humorous effect on Outcast's official website (www. outcast-thegame.com). The site's lavish video section still hosts out-take videos, which match in-game visuals to the voice-acting out-takes that never made it into the game itself, for sometimes hilarious effect.**





Slade has to find a probe and some scientists sent from Earth, but that won't stop him being a messiah in the local prophecies

wanted," explains Grolet. "It was also the first time that a game blended action and adventure in a seamless manner and without scarring either of those two components."

Outcast's alien planet was populated by a vibrant culture that swept from peasant-filled paddy fields to grim and dusty deserts. Once the tutorial (infamous for its near-impossible stealth training) was out of the way, players were able to access any of the huge terrains that made up the game's different regions. Go anywhere, talk to anyone, you just had to stay alive long enough to unravel the bigger mysteries. Working with the natives against their oppressors was an epic task and keeping people on-side took some work for even the most dedicated roleplayers. For Appeal this meant a massive effort in scripting conversations and creating robust AI for the alien peoples.

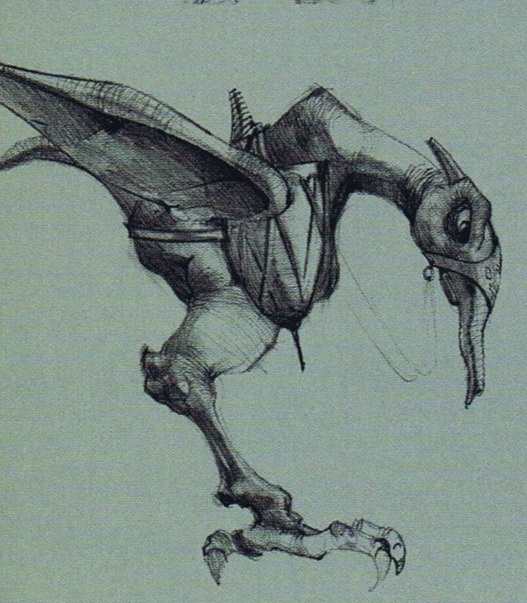
Grolet is keen to emphasise this point: "*Outcast* was a game that featured an alien world that appeared alive with citizens 'living' their lives during the game. The AI was one of the most difficult parts to develop because the citizens had to do their job, react to the player missions, react to the player reputation and also react to danger and combat happening around them. The difficulty was to have the citizens prioritise and select the appropriate behaviours at any moment of the game."

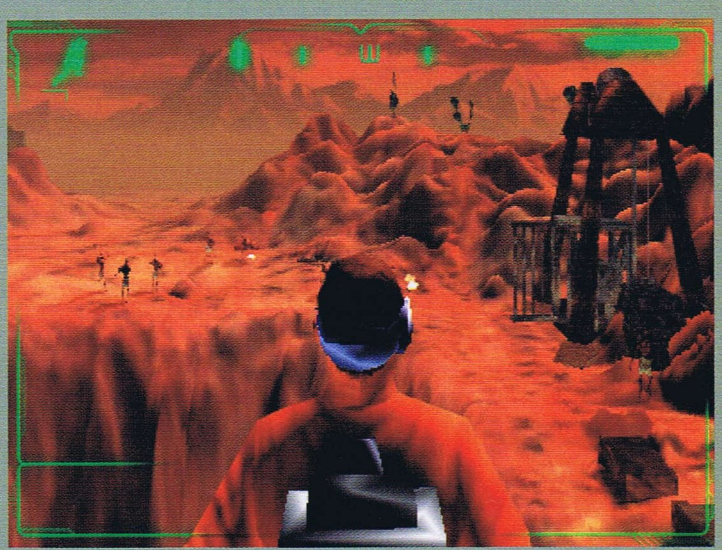
For the most part, this approach was extremely rewarding. Even contemporary games such as *Morrowind* have struggled to provide such a sophisticated and believable game world, one in which NPCs aren't simply mannequin conversations waiting to happen. Grolet is justifiably proud of his team's success in making people feel like they could approach a living world in any way they saw fit. Even massively multiplayer games have not yet reached the same level of complexity and believability that *Outcast* achieved.

Nevertheless, many gamers were put off by the unusual visuals, as Grolet concedes: "The biggest failure is that the software rendering appeared a bit outdated at the release of the game." Appeal had made the decision to employ voxels, the 3D pixel technology made infamous by Novalogic's *Comanche* and *Delta Force* games. The 3D card revolution that was taking place around the development of *Outcast* meant that traditional polygons had leapt ahead in sophistication, leaving the CPU-dependent voxel system looking clumsy and outmoded. "At the beginning of the development of *Outcast*, 3D cards did not exist," says Grolet. "We decided to use voxels because it was a method that allowed us to render realistic landscapes. We decided to render landscapes instead of indoor environments because it was refreshing and different from the other games. Moreover, natural landscapes were a richer source of inspiration for us to make a world that allowed the player to dream about epic adventures."

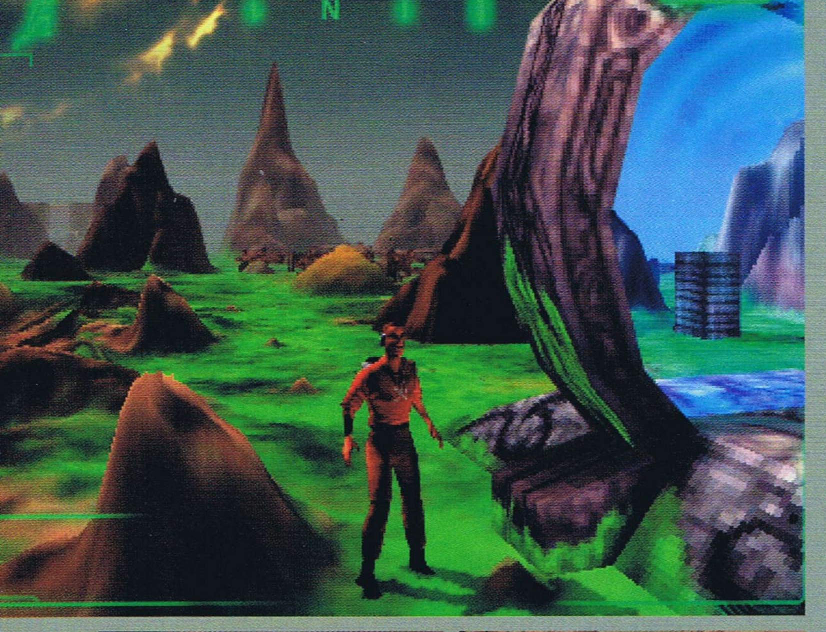
Outcast's rolling landscapes and wondrous water effects did indeed entrance many gamers, but it didn't

Outcast's alien planet was populated by a vibrant culture that swept from peasant-filled paddy fields to grim and dusty deserts

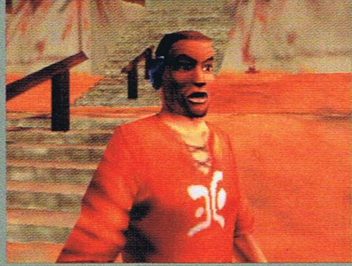




***Outcast*'s voxels generate some realistic-looking terrain, but the 3D engine is perhaps at its most effective when handling water effects, producing collections of pools full of gorgeously lapping liquid**







Voxels look good on a magazine page, but they actually blow up to look exceedingly blocky on-screen. Challenging for the average PC of the time, the unusual 3D tech now runs perfectly on a decent machine

stand up to the likes of id Software's *Quake* technologies for sheer visual impact. "The difficulty we encountered with voxels was that the image cleanness was not as good as the ones rendered with 3D cards that started to appear during the development and dominated the market at the release of the game," explains Grolet. "We had to face a transition of technology and we decided to stick to our initial choice to stay coherent with our vision of huge and detailed natural landscapes."

While the use of voxels did bring with it some significant constraints, particularly on how detailed character models could be, they did allow for a landscape of a kind of size and complexity that is only just being achieved by polygonal approaches today. But for gamers who'd just invested in shiny graphics cards it wasn't really an option to splash out on new a CPU for a quirky French adventure game, no matter how impressive its ambitions. Voxels fell from grace, with *Outcast* acting as their death knell. Subsequent CPU power increases mean that this distinctive 3D approach might one day make a return, perhaps in further hybrid approaches like that of *Black Hawk Down*, where Novalogic mixed voxels with mainstream polygonal models. But they were not to be used for *Outcast II*, a game for which Appeal would take quite a different, and ultimately fatal, approach.

With critical success and a small but enthusiastic fanbase behind it, *Outcast* was well set for a sequel, but Grolet wasn't to be a part of that doomed project: "I quit Appeal at the beginning of the development because I did not agree with my ex-associates on the way to handle *Outcast II*. I would rather not go into details here. Unfortunately, two years after my departure, Atari – then Infogrames – decided to cancel *Outcast II*. It was a sad decision that disappointed everybody."

Yet *Outcast* still persists on the fringes of PC gaming, a part of the free-roaming adventure lineage that stretches from the ancient 3D adventure *Midwinter* right up to present-day offerings such as *STALKER* and *Morrowind*. The internet has proved a haven for the iconoclastic adventure, with an effort to create a sequel to *Outcast* being undertaken on an open-source website, where fans of the game have taken on the old voxel engine and attempted to give it new life with their Open Outcast development project. Point your web browser towards www.openoutcast.de to check up on the continuing legacy of one of PC gaming's brightest stars.

Studio profile

The people behind the games

COMPANY NAME: Binary Star

DATE FOUNDED: 2002

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 22

HEAD OF STUDIO: Thomas Reimann


The Binary Star team, with producer Thomas Reimann far left.

LOCATION: Takapuna which is part of Auckland's Northshore.

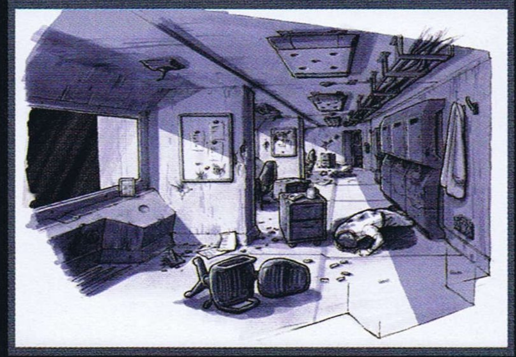
PAST PROJECTS:
Projects Reimann have worked on were 'Xena, the warrior Princess' and 'Hercules, the Legendary'. Many of the staff have worked on film and TV projects like 'Lord of the Rings' etc.

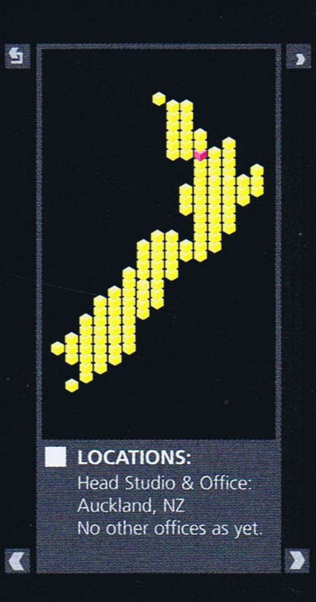
URL: www.binary-star.com

KEY STAFF:
Thomas Reimann - Producer and Managing Director
Stephen Woodward - Producer's Assistant
Miles Macklin - Lead Programmer
Ben Stenbeck - Art Director/Concept Artist
Andre Skuja - Art Director/Concept Artist
Hamish Beachman - Lead Artist

PROPRIETARY TECHNOLOGIES: Jupiter Engine; fully Unlike most debutant devlopment outfits, Binary Star are producing their own engine for Homeland – the Jupiter Engine. The engine handles graphics effects such as Per pixel dynamic lighting, Multi bone inverse kinematics, Optimized static and dynamic shadows, but this is a full system package. Everything from AI, physics, surround sound, scripting and the Europa level editor are all comprehensive elements of the Jupiter Engine.


Homeland in action above, with concept art below





LOCATIONS:
Head Studio & Office:
Auckland, NZ
No other offices as yet.



LOCAL CALL

A phone call to the Australian development scene

Binary Star CEP Thomas Reimann on aiming for the top

The rise of Peter Jackson has cemented New Zealand on the world movie scene, but success in the games industry has been more elusive for the archipelago of 4 million. That's all about to change. Binary Star made a splash at AGDC 2004, blowing away all comers with their new FPS, Homeland. This company is breaking all the rules: proprietary technology, original intellectual property, and full scale production from an unsigned developer.

Those who've seen Homeland in action know their confidence is justified. We caught up with Binary Star founder Thomas Reimann to talk about their impending success...

What kind of a gaming scene is there in New Zealand? Do you consider yourselves part of the 'Australasian' scene, or as within a distinctly NZ industry where you're pretty much unique?

Our games development market is small enough, even if you combine everything. There's nothing [aside] from us, and maybe Sidhe Interactive. They don't actually "develop" develop, they only use middleware, really. In New Zealand, we are the only actual, serious developer with its own engine. In the past 10 years, there have been attempts... but no other company has survived or actually thrived, in the end.

What about publishing strategies? Have you considered trying to self-publish over the internet, or something like that?

No. This year is all about selling this game - Homeland - which we've been working on for the last three years now. We're about to sign with an agent, and they will start negotiations with various publishers, among them probably Microsoft.

What is the stance from the NZ govt.? Do they encourage developers of games, or are you not even on their radar?

I started this company three years ago, after I got really sick of TV and visual effects which is what I was working in. I started talking to the various government agencies, because I figured "there must be a bit of money around." Something, some sort of help; but as it turns out there's absolutely nothing around, and there's no incentive for the politicians to actually do something about it.

We've been fighting for money - not only for us, but for any small start-up - ever since. Even though I think it's quite a low [government] priority.

We got one technology grant for some of the stuff we were developing for Homeland, which was not significant, but was at least nice "I'm sorry" present from the government. Nothing that could sustain us for more than literally two, three weeks. Especially with a team of 22 people - we're burning money like crazy, really.

There's a film fund in New Zealand, I'm not sure how big it is now, NZ$10 million or something? There's no game development fund, as of yet. It's one thing we're pushing towards, that might help quite a bit. Even two or three million would be quite a lot. You can do a lot with that sort of money when you're working on a game. When you're working on a movie, two or three million is a joke, really.

One complaint that is often bandied about in Australia is that of the "brain drain," that "all our best talent goes to America." Do you have the same thing in NZ?

Oh yes! Oh yes! Yeah, yeah, the Brain Drain is like, the big thing here. It's mentioned every week on TV, somewhere, from one politician or another. And it's true!

Basically, if we shut down, then [our staff] would have no other choice than to go to the US or Europe, or do something completely different.

You know? Fair enough. I would, probably, if I was in the same situation.

What other weaknesses or strengths define the NZ economic climate, re. Games development? It's often cited that with currency differences it's far cheaper to develop in Australia. Is the same true in NZ?

Yes - it's probably even a little bit better here. It's true, but at the end of the day, there are two types of games you can develop: one is the budget title, and that has to be really cheap, because you sell very few, or you go for the AAA title.

Money doesn't seem to be an issue if you're aiming for the top, really. But it's always good when you're cheap, you know? If you're not selling that well, your losses aren't going to be as bad.

It seems you're in a solid position. You have your own technology, and your own intellectual property, and both of those are very important pillars to build on. In the future, would you look to create new I.P.s, or will you churn our sequels to Homeland?

This is a really good question. For Homeland 2, yes, definitely. If this is going to be a success - which we are quite sure of - then we would definitely want to look into a sequel. But I think the whole team, for the next project, will want to do something completely different. We've already made a decision where we want to go next. It's something that we're probably going to start looking at this year.

What kind of themes are your addressing in Homeland? What inspired you and the team to create it?

We're quite tight-wrapped about the story. I love story, really. The most important thing for any other piece of entertainment is a good story, a good world. Something rich and deep enough that you feel it could be real.

With Homeland, the idea is to create a futuristic version of the Cold War. It is a post-nuclear world, completely iced-over; almost like an ice planet.

It's drawing a little from Fallout, which is one of my all-time favourites, and the other one, that it's going to be much closer to, is System Shock 2.

It sounds a bit like the scenario described at the end of Dr. Strangelove, where the survivors are living in mine shafts. Is there going to be an element of comedy in it?

No, it's a very serious story, actually.

"There's a film fund in NZ, I'm not sure how big it is now. NZ$10M or something. There's no game development fund as of yet..."

Local Call is just that - a call to a local developer. If you have any comments, send them to: Edge@derwenthoward.com.au

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Billboards for sale

We already have plenty of product placement, but in-game advertising's next step could be the dynamically-updated Massive Advertising Network

www.hivepartners.com
www.massiveincorporated.com

It was media guru Marshall McLuhan who first pointed out the circular logic of the phrase 'adverts don't have any effect on me'. That people noticed adverts was enough to change their buying habits, whether or not this worked in favour of particular products, he argued. Thirty years on, advertising has become a much more slippery commodity. But with corporations spending over $300 billion globally, its overall effectiveness is no longer an issue for debate. Everywhere there are eyeballs seeking entertainment there is advertising, and this is becoming increasingly true in the case of games.

One reason is purely negative: the perceived impact of games on the TV viewing habits of young men. Last year, US TV rating company Nielsen Media reported a fall in the amount of prime-time TV viewing among 18-34-year-old men. Similarly, a less rigorous study by Ziff Davis Digital Gaming in America reckoned a quarter of gamers had swapped TV watching time for playing time.

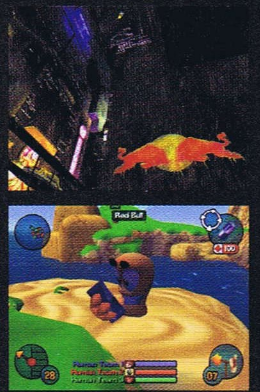
However accurate any particular set of figures, one of the clearest examples of mainstream media concern was the action of Viacom CEO Sumner Redstone. The billionaire octogenarian, who runs the advertising-oriented media conglomerate that owns CBS as well as cable TV, radio and billboard divisions, spent over $200 million of his own money buying a controlling stake in ailing game publisher Midway. The reason, according to his daughter, Shari Redstone – now Midway's vice chairman – was that, unlike television, with games you know the consumers' eyeballs are glued to the screen.

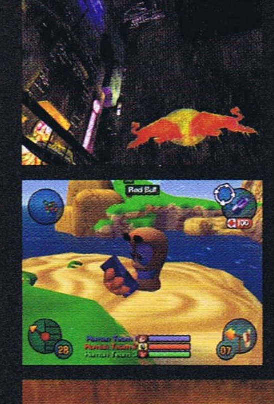
Equally the tendency of games to be reality- and brand-based is another reason they're becoming more attractive to advertisers. One of many recent deals has seen Reebok sign a financially undisclosed multi-title agreement with EA. Starting with *NFL Street 2*, Reebok products such as its NFL-licensed range and the Pump Paydirt Bringback crosstrainer will be featured.

"Our goal of enrolling youth into the brand through sports, entertainment and technology manifests itself perfectly in games like this. It's an important and extremely effective part of our integrated marketing model," commented **Brian Povinelli**, Reebok's vice president of integrated marketing.

Yet there's one company out to revolutionise the relationship between advertisers and gamers. Massive Inc is in the early stages of rolling out its in-game dynamic advertising network. Imaginatively called the Massive Advertising Network, its unique selling point is flexibility. While developers just put placeholder billboards or videoscreens into their environments, the network will download appropriate product adverts to fill the gaps depending on the gamer's age, social demographic group or even seasonal events, whenever they go online.

"Our in-game advertising is delivered in a seamless manner that does not interfere with gameplay in any way,"

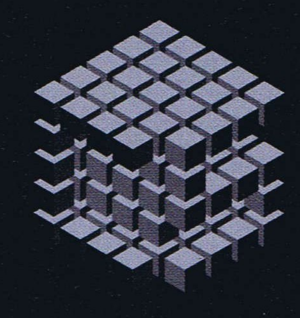




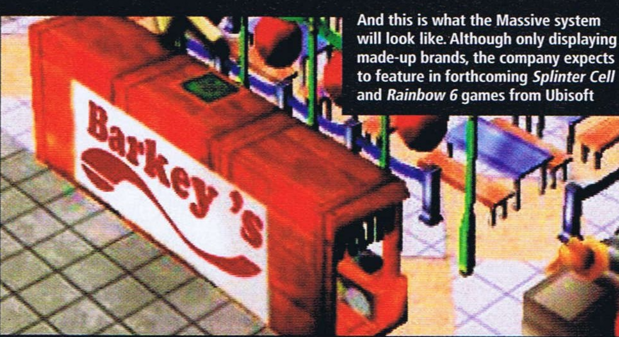


Advertising in games has been with us for a long time, as seen in these shots from *Judge Dredd: Dredd Vs Death* and *Worms 3D*. These static methods of advertising, although no doubt lucrative for the companies involved at the time, are made obsolete by new insertion methods









And this is what the Massive system will look like. Although only displaying made-up brands, the company expects to feature in forthcoming *Splinter Cell* and *Rainbow 6* games from Ubisoft







One of the main obstacles to the widespread adoption of in-game advertising is the need for good statistics. With this in mind, TV ratings group Nielsen Interactive Entertainment is running several trials to track both the interaction of gamers with in-game ads as well as attitudes towards different types of adverts. Research with Massive concerning the best way to measure and validate the data from the Massive Advertising Network will underpin its full commercial launch for ad buyers during early summer. A separate initiative with Activision has studied players' reaction to adverts for Jeep placed within the PC version of *THUG 2* (above).

reckons **Richard Skeen**, Massive's vice president of advertising sales. And because of the network structure, the system can be aggregated across many different game titles, potentially providing advertisers with the large number of eyeballs they require. Another advantage of such a system is that advertisers can gain clear feedback about how many people have seen their product, when they saw it and for how long. This can then be used to see what effect adverts have on their business.

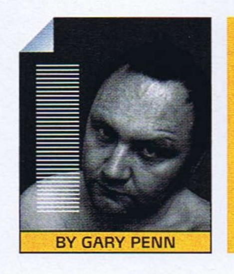
Already live with *Mall Tycoon* and *Ski Tycoon*, two games from Take Two's budget arm Global Star, Skeen says the company will be launching 30 titles during the year, providing advertisers with an audience of around three million in the 18-34-year-old male demographic.

But, of course, there are some key problems to be ironed out before the network will be financially viable. First, it relies on as many publishers as possible to integrate the Massive Advertising Network SDK into their games. Of the large publishers Ubisoft, Atari, Konami and Vivendi have signed up so far, and there's also the sticky issue of platform coverage. Currently limited to PC games, it's unclear whether Sony, Nintendo and particularly Microsoft will allow Massive access to their consoles' online networks. Nevertheless, Massive says it will introduce a console-based product by the summer.

Yet others point out that in such a nascent situation both advertisers and game companies should exercise some caution. Once a business development director for UK studio The Bitmap Brothers, **Ed Bartlett** now runs Hive Partners, which offers creative services to game developers. Despite having placed brands such as Red Bull in games such as *Judge Dredd* and *Worms*, he says that as more mainstream advertisers get involved in games there is potential to damage brands and games.

"You only have to think about how annoying pop-ups are on the internet," he explains. Instead, Hive prefers to work at a lower level where products and their relation to gameplay are more integrated. One example is the forthcoming *Manx TT* racing game from Jester Interactive, where an as-yet-unannounced sponsor will be associated with the power boost option.

Bartlett says such relationships work out better for both parties, with the advertiser placed in the optimum context and the developer and publisher maintaining the integrity of their product while generating extra revenue. "And in the current commercial climate, developers understand they need to embrace such opportunities in order to survive," he points out. Yet even with such activity there's still a long way to go before games attract serious advertising money. In 2003, US advertisers spent $12 billion on TV spots targetting young men. The equivalent figure for in-game ads was $10 million.



BY GARY PENN

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Adult entertainment

Smoking, drug abuse, 'language', violence, nudity, sex, sexuality, paraphilia… How naturally, comfortably can mature content so well represented in established media be woven into play? Become play? Will become play? Should become play?

Violence in play tends to be thoughtless – throwaway, careless, simplistic, remote, detached. A pity, partly because it's a wasted opportunity. Actual violence is deplorable but fictitious violence within the safety of paper or celluloid or digital media is to be encouraged, especially when it opens our eyes to the animal inside and appreciate what it means to suffer or take a life.

Like its media peers, virtual space should be used to express violence as an art form – exploiting and exploring the notion of using proficiency and panache to commit violent acts, akin to sculptors, painters and performance artists. Perhaps using vehicles and skill to carefully, considerately knock down pedestrians before relentlessly manipulating their increasingly mutilated bodies, wheelspinning on their stunned forms to create elaborate crimson plumes, dragging and smearing them along the street, crushing and bursting them like overripe berries against walls, repeatedly ramming them until their mashed forms decorate the scenery, Pollocking the environment… What justification for such carnage?

The fact remains that destruction is satisfying – especially at the expense of others, especially when someone has spent time constructing something and we know that means something to that someone. And a life usually means the most to most of us.

Reading about or watching the exploits of serial killers is one thing – but to play as one? Actors already do for our benefit. But the director told him to do it – inspired by the writer writing wrongs. You only watched, helpless, unable – perhaps even unwilling to act. In play you have no such excuses. You don't just view – you do. Of course, it's already common to play a serial killer but the role isn't formally recognised through ceremony. Allowing players to kill the innocent relentlessly and remorselessly is one thing, but to identify the fact, admit to its existence, endorse it, honour it, celebrate it – that's a line waiting to be crossed.

> "Allowing players to kill the innocent remorselessly is one thing, but to identify the fact – that's a line waiting to be crossed"

There are more than playscape boundaries to define when building simulations of a real world for play. Living, breathing cities wholly populated by all-white males of average stature and demeanour is fine for making a statement but it's hardly an authentic contemporary civilised setting – a foundation in reality to make the experience all the more accessible and stimulating. Some plausible variation is required: some ladies, different races, different heights and weights, different ages, perhaps even a representation of disabilities. Cue: issues.

Using a toy adult male to drive a toy car into toy children in a toy playground has natural (physical) results – one model with statistics superior to another imparts forces and the result is broken toys. Of course, the toy children could just as easily be cardboard boxes but there are distinctive visual forms to stimulate – and itch the conscience.

Brazen sex has rarely featured in commercial games beyond the ceremonial but it won't be long before fucking is more strongly and casually integrated into the role play, perhaps like fighting but with kissing replacing kicking, stroking instead of punching, trading different kinds of blows – a nod towards 'rhythm action' perhaps, literally making music, sparks, fireworks, effects reflecting the quality of your performance.

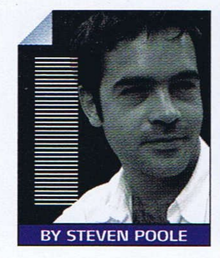
With sex and violence in the same space, virtual rape becomes reality (well, the suggestion of rape – it's not as if a toy can't consent). And if the victim is a child doll… Not that the software cares: it's just another model obeying the same natural rules as everything else.

Over the past 30 years, millions of us have committed countless violent acts including shooting, stabbing, bludgeoning, burning, bursting, crushing, beheading, exploding – even genocide and suicide. Those thugs, monsters, aliens obviously mean trouble and deserve it because they are bad to the core – they started it so it's self-defence or valid moral vengeance.

Who thinks twice about such atrocities? Since when did anyone care about the perspective of the victims? Were they really asking for it? Perhaps you were the invader in their space? So seldom are the blatantly virtuous ever on the receiving end. Defenceless bystanders are usually dumb animals or seemingly willing participants. What makes a cluster of pixels, an assemblage of polygons and textures wrapped around a virtual skeleton more than the sum of its parts – something meaningful, regrettable? Its role? Motivation? Performance? The fact that it runs or crawls away from your relentless persecution, wide-eyed in terror when you assault it? That it doesn't run but cowers, pissing itself, crying, begging, screaming for mercy, attempting to justify its right to life? What makes you kill and care so little?

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki



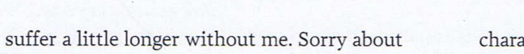


BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY

The rooftops of Paris

Half-Life 2 makes me sick. Not in the way that it is doubtless making rival developers sick, in that it's so astonishingly good and has so casually raised the bar way beyond what other games are doing or even had thought of doing. No, sadly, this masterpiece gives me stomach-churning motion sickness. Some people get it with any FPS; the Japanese are known to be more susceptible. But it's not something I've experienced since I watched a friend complete a level on *GoldenEye* purely by slapping the enemy around. Back then it was a combination of alcohol, low framerate and watching, rather than doing, that made me feel queasy. Here I don't know what it is – I've tried widening the field of vision and reducing graphics settings to near-*3D Monster Maze* quality to no avail – but I can't be Gordon Freeman any longer for the moment. The depressed citizens of City 17 will have to suffer a little longer without me. Sorry about that, guys.



" I have been exploring City 17 and the City of Light, the one calling to me from the other, the second an escape from the first "

So I can only offer a partial, provisional list of little things I love about *Half-Life 2*. The way Freeman never speaks, and the way other characters turn this into a running joke, is a perfect riposte to either the clunky choose-your-own-adventure-style dialogic choices offered by such games as *Deus Ex*, or the way other games just don't notice that you float through them as dumb as a plastic mannequin. The abundant wide-open dynamic spaces give you a sense of tactical freedom, but are also designed with exquisite subtlety always to channel you in the right direction. You're thrilled at being hunted, yet you don't feel as though you are being herded through a linear maze; somehow you just sense that one particular way is the right way to go. And you're always right, which is to say that the game is always right too.

The city itself is a masterclass in downbeat beauty. When too many games resemble the result of a riot in an art director's studio, all clashing styles and lurid colour schemes, the subdued hues and dramatic skies of *Half-Life 2*, along with the attention lavished on the despairing expressions of the downtrodden populace, add up to something approaching a tragic aesthetic grandeur. We could talk physics, weapons and vehicles, too, the whole box of toys that the game offers, but for me a large part of the genius of *Half-Life 2* is a crane glinting near the horizon in the distance, or the pink hue of a sunset sky reflected in rippling water. This is an environment that has been given character through countless tiny touches, through the fears and dreams of its inhabitants. It offers an unparalleled sense of place, filled with foreboding and threat and yet a hope that beauty might survive the conflagration.

But, as I said, I can't go there any more. So instead I go outside to get some fresh air and explore the new city on my doorstep, which is Paris. I've been visiting this area in the 18th arrondissement regularly for over a year, so it's not entirely novel to me, but there's a lot more to discover when you actually live here. Just as with a *Grand Theft Auto* game, you start off bewildered by the scale of the place, and quickly learn a few major routes to places of interest. Then you start exploring nooks and alleyways, and learn some shortcuts. Before long you automatically know how to get to a few familiar Pay 'n' Spray facilities and gunshops – or, as it may be in my somewhat less crime-infested neighbourhood, cafés and patisseries. It's funny how the process of learning a virtual city has become so close to the process of learning a real one, and how strategies for the former can inform the latter.

Game culture is pervasive here, too – my local Métro station is plastered with huge poster ads for *San Andreas*. But there is also the delightful, whimsical and oddly haunting phenomenon of the mosaic space invaders. For a few years, an incognito artist has been placing little space invaders made out of small ceramic coloured tiles on the external walls of buildings in Paris. They wink at you as you turn a corner, or gaze down at you through your café window. Other people, from time to time, come and remove the mosaics. When this happens, the artist returns and writes a score in the space vacated by the alien – it might be five points or 10 points, depending on how difficult it had been to capture (height above ground, accessibility of nearest window, and so on). The creator and his devoted pilferers are locked in a slow-motion game, which turns the environment into another kind of virtual playground.

Thus I have been exploring City 17 and the City of Light, the one calling to me from the other, the second an escape from the first. I hope to be able to return to *Half-Life 2*, nurturing the hope that some recondite technical setting might ameliorate my nausea, but for now the rooftops of the real city symbolise a new challenge.

And that, readers, is my Paris game life this month.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames (Fourth Estate). www.stevenpoole.net





THE GUEST COLUMN

White-collar fraud online

A widely held prejudice is that gamers don't read (present company excepted, of course). But this summer a newly written opus, by and for gamers, was published chapter by chapter, Dickens-style, on somethingawful.com. The Great Scam, 15,000 words by an author known only as Nightfreeze, was read by hundreds, then by hundreds of thousands, until the server collapsed. This was no fan-fiction, but fan-fact. 'This is a story of deception, intrigue, and double-crosses," the story began. "It is a story of liars, bandits, and greed. This is the story of my life in *Eve Online*'.

Eve Online, a massively multiplayer virtual universe designed for trading and space combat, was Nightfreeze's life. He spent more time navigating the *Eve* universe than navigating his campus hallways. Bored and restless, he and his best friend Trazir decided to form a partnership. Another trader, HardHead, lent them 3 million.

> Nightfreeze's memoir is the first work of literature to alter the laws of the universe. Dickens would be proud

They bought a colossal ship, poured their cash into computers, and within three hours had doubled their money. They were in business.

Their only obstacles were pirates. Every trade run, privateers homed in on their lumbering ship and demanded payment. When they refused, the pirates lasered their ship to ashes. With hardly any firepower, all they could do was run – so they learned to run in style with expensive engines, micro-warp drives (MWDs), which could rocket their ship to safety. The pirates ate exhaust fumes. Within two weeks, Nightfreeze was worth close to 85 million. Then the universe changed the rules.

One morning, two months into his lucrative new career, Nightfreeze baited the pirates as usual, waited until they closed in, then activated his drives. Which didn't work. The enraged pirates destroyed his ship – 35 million worth of hardware and 40 million in cargo. In revenge for his insults, they shot up his escape pod, too.

The pirates, unhappy with the MWDs, had complained to the gods – the developers – and the gods had listened. Suddenly, the drives barely worked. But nobody had told Nightfreeze. His fledgling career – and two months of his life – was in ashes. He was about to log off permanently in disgust, but then had a better idea. The rules didn't care for him; why should he care for the rules? He made a call to his friend, who agreed. They would perpetrate the biggest scam the universe had ever seen.

To establish their con, they paid 20 new players 10,000 credits each to join their 'corporation', named ZZZBest (after an infamously fraudulent carpet cleaning firm.) Inworld, on noticeboards and in instant messages to all their trading partners, the pair announced their mission: to acquire the blueprints for an Apocalypse battleship, the most powerful in the game. These cost 1.2 billion; by combining their purchase power, they claimed, they would offer the same blueprint to each investor for just 100 million. Slowly, their offer began to attract potential partners. They populated bulletin boards with fake investors, and arranged a fake chatroom 'investor conference'. One investor – the largest – insisted on speaking with Nightfreeze in person. Nightfreeze gave the number of his local library payphone, and sprinted to catch the call. The investor said yes.

By 9am the next morning, Nightfreeze's account held 480 million credits (worth nearly $3,000 US). He transferred the money to a dummy character. Then, with one click of his mouse, deleted his account. After gloating in reply to a few instant-message death threats, he cancelled his IM accounts too. It was the perfect crime – the criminal no longer existed.

But what now? His half of the money belonged to a new character without pilot skills; he had hundreds of millions, but nothing to buy. He toyed with a few passing ships, and was instantly killed. Somehow, it barely seemed worth it. Nightfreeze hailed a passing player, Frosttt, in a beginner ship, asking: "What would you say if I were to offer you 300 million?"

"I'd say pretty cool," said Frosttt. Nightfreeze wired all his credits over and logged off. He never logged in again, and began to pen his story.

In the real world, time is money; in a virtual world, money is time. Despite complaints, the investors got no compensation. Their loss – the time it took to earn their credits – had no legal value. Game developers need it that way, otherwise every bug, closure or game change would be followed by a class action suit. The games would become true economies; every player would have to fill in a tax return.

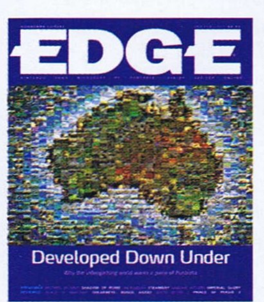
After it became clear there would be no payback, the *Eve Online* bulletin boards erupted in fury. That's how virtual worlds affect us: once the borders with the real world are threatened, we feel threatened too. Only one level-headed commentator pointed out the double standards: "You can be a pirate in this game, but you can't be a white-collar criminal."

No one heard from Nightfreeze again. *Eve Online*'s terms of service have been changed to warn against such scams; Nightfreeze's memoir is the first work of literature to alter the laws of the universe. Dickens would be proud.

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta



Inbox



Issue 4

After reading your World of Warcraft review I was compelled to give MMORPG gaming another go - It sounded like Blizzard had addressed all the things that had put me off in the past about this pay-per-play genre.

Unfortunately I've been finding it extremely difficult to acquire a copy of the game, something I never expected from a subscription based game that obviously requires a user base to be established to set up a revenue stream.

I've been hearing all manner of rumours as to why the title is so hard to come by, but would appreciate your relatively unbiased take upon the situation.

Aaron O'Connnor

There are two principle reasons behind the rarity of World of Warcraft. One, the game is in higher demand than Blizzard first anticipated. Secondly, Blizzard have made a statement about ensuring that the game's performance maintains a certain standard, and that they don't want to add more customers into the mix until they're certain that won't add to the problems. Noble reasons indeed.

Welcome to the age of fast graphics, release parties and the I-want-more ethos. Gibberish, I know, but I must admit I am quite annoyed about where gaming seems to be going. Remember the good old days when games were about more than how many pixels you could cram into one frame or how fast your refresh rate was?

Things are spiralling out of control. We're no longer content with what we have; we are forever looking to the future for the next big release, the next sequel/prequel/spin-off.

I have to look back over the years and ask: where did we go astray? When did we stop enjoying the games we have and start wanting the next big revelation in games technology, the next generation of FPS/RTS/MMOG? The release of *Half-Life 2* was supposed to be a massive landmark for all of gaming because of the massively brilliant first game. And Valve took their time and didn't rush things just to satisfy marketing people – or the gaming populous, for that matter. But then we look at *Halo 2*, rushed into production to satisfy a needy Xbox market hungry for a big title, and it shows (oh my, how it shows). I remember seeing Bungie's videos for *Halo* when it was an amazing Mac title before Microsoft ensnared them and there was no question that time and effort had been applied in bundles.

So I put a question to all gamers: are you going to be part of this new, insatiable gaming monstrosity, or are you going to change your ideas about gaming, be content with what you have, and thereby encourage developers to put the time and effort into their games that both they and you deserve?

Stevie McClatchey

When did we stop enjoying the games we have and start wanting the next big revelation in games technology, the next generation of FPS/RTS/MMOG?

But it isn't a 'new monstrosity', is it? Haven't videogamers always wanted tomorrow today? Of course, this doesn't mean some of us couldn't benefit from taking a step back every once in a while. Dare you risk it?

Something that irks me, and I'd venture to say bothers other gamers is the common phenomena of good games that are terrible value. A couple of examples such as *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* and *The Chronicles of Riddick*. Both titles played beautifully, but were over long before the novelty was. In fairness I should consider that perhaps these games didn't last so long because they were compelling enough to keep me pushing towards the endgame. However, this does nothing to change the fact that some games are simply not worth the money, even though they're definitely worth buying.

I'm wondering why more game developers haven't tried using subscription based payment schemes like the MMO games do. I can see difficulties with this, but surely there's got to be a way to give gamers the opportunity to pay for what they're getting, rather than a pre-determined premium rate that game publishers consider the standard?

Your team gets to deal with developers directly, so I'd be very grateful if you could pass on any insights into why we haven't seen much more progress in this area than the inevitable appearence of a bargain bin at most stores?

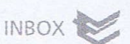
Michael Lang

You've hit onto something that Jason Rubin brought up in his keynote speech at the Australian Game Developers Conference 2004. With development costs rising and piracy acting as a constant revenue syphon for the publishers, Rubin made a point of noting that subscription based gaming was thriving in Asia, most notably in Korea, and suggested it was only a matter of time before the rest of the world warmed to the billing system.

But **Edge** isn't about to pretend that there's an easy way to implement this with games with a finite play experience, which of course is the vast majority of them. Pay-per-play through *Sands of Time*? How much for one day's play?

I simply love the *Half-Life 2* dev team, and if I ever meet any of them, I will kiss them. The reason for this isn't (just) that they delivered us an awesome game, though. The actual reason is much simpler: the subtitles. I was dumbstruck by the 'hard-of-hearing' subtitles offered by the game. Being hearing impaired myself, it was something awesome, and I found myself immersed with the game on a deeper level than ever before. And for a gamer of two decades that says a lot.

I hope other developers take notice of this and will implement the feature in their games too. All too frequently I have found myself wanting to kick someone's ass for an otherwise great game lacking subtitles. (Working in the field of software engineering myself, I know from experience that creating a



subtitling system isn't really that hard either, so that's no excuse.)

Over the years there have been too many games I would've loved to play but have been forced to leave them on store shelves due to lacking subtitles. *Blade Runner* was one of the first of this kind, the *Thief* series also was left gathering dust; lately I've missed *Prince Of Persia* and *Splinter Cell*.

And I know for certain I'm not alone with my decisions. I personally know many people, both hearing impaired and not, who have chosen to leave an otherwise-interesting game gathering dust because it doesn't offer subtitles. Although every one of these people is more or less fluent in English, they still prefer it written, not spoken, especially when voice acting involves accents and dramatic effects. If even some English people have trouble with a cockney drawl, how the hell is the rest of the world supposed to understand it? And in the middle of a nerve-breaking firefight we'd prefer a curt text message instead of a shrill voice screaming something that is lost amidst all the other noise.

So, if developers really want to maximise their sales potential, I'd strongly recommend them to include subtitles in their games (and not just for the actual game sections, but also for FMVs). Please do this, and we'll thank you with our wallets.

Perttu Mäkelä

Is there anything Valve's game *doesn't* do well? (OK, don't mention the online hassles.) On a related note, have a look at www.deafgamers.com, a fan-run site whose additional evidence shows that most developers need to get their acts together when it comes to subtitles.

Having just read the excellent Time Extend feature on *Eternal Darkness*, I am left wondering why your reviews do not take this form? Of course I am not suggesting spending six pages on each game, but this belated review told me more about the qualities of the game (and why I should want to play it) than any discussion about its combat system, weapons, or playability could have. In particular, here we learn something about the fundamental design and the reasons behind it, as well as an extended analysis of the storyline and why it does or doesn't work. Such things are also present in your normal reviews, of course, but there they tend to be stated abstractly. I understand the need to avoid spoilers, but surely some compromise is possible. After all, right now I feel like rushing out and buying *Eternal Darkness*, and considering I don't even own a GameCube, that's saying something...

Hans Guijt

But Time Extend, by its definition, is a reflective look, produced with the wonderful benefit of hindsight. There's the rub.



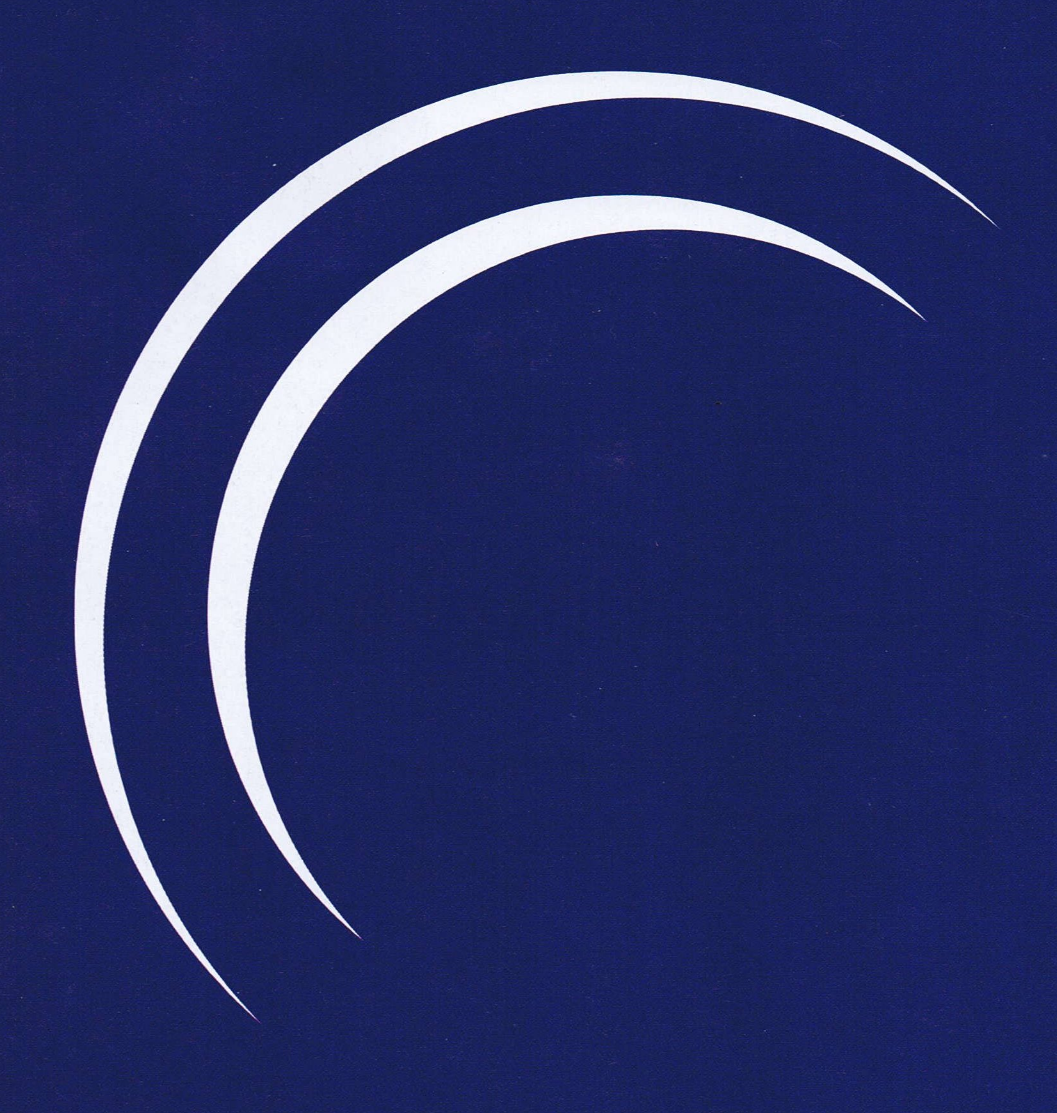
I must admit, I nearly didn't do it. I nearly didn't persevere. Max Headroom wasn't funny first time around. I'm talking about *Half-Life 2*, of course. But I pressed on, tweaking here and there, and eventually I came to realise why it was indeed the best game of 2004. Next time, though, can't you forewarn us about bugs like this?

J J Alexander

Unfortunately *Half-Life 2*'s audio-stuttering bugs weren't evident in the review build we used, so it wasn't an issue that needed addressing at the time. Well done for seeing it through, though.

Crashlander™
BY JAMES HUTCHINSON
HEH HEH HEH!
WHAT ARE YOU GIGGLING TO YOURSELF ABOUT?
IT'S MY LATEST GET RICH QUICK SCHEME! I'M DRAWING A PICTURE OF A DS AND SELLING IT ON EBAY!
THESE KIDS ARE SO DESPERATE TO GET THEIR HANDS ON THIS CRAP THEY DON'T BOTHER TO READ MY INTENTIONALLY MISLEADING DESCRIPTION! THIS WORK OF ART IS GONNA MAKE ME A HUNDRED BELLS AT LEAST!!
LEMME SEE THAT...
A DS
Nintendo
WOW. I DUNNO... NEEDS SOMETHING ELSE...
HEY! YOU GODDAMN RUINED IT!! I SPENT HOURS ON THIS!
YOU'RE THE SCUM OF THE EARTH, DALE.
YOU WANNA DANCE WITH ME, WHITE BOY?!
HEY GUYS, STOP FIGHTING! I JUST BOUGHT A PICTURE OF A NINTENDO DS FROM EBAY!!
YAY!

Visit the Crashlander archive at www.crashlander.com/edge



Next month

Edge 6
on sale April 13


Nintendo GAME BOY


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